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“Britain’s Spiritual Life: How Can It Be Deepened?” Seebohm Rowntree, Russell Lavers and the “Crisis of Belief,” c. 1946-1954

The secularization of modern Britain, which was previously viewed as a phenomenon associated with industrialization and urbanization in the nineteenth century, has more recently been located in the twentieth century. Whereas historians once saw the period 1870-1920 as the culmination of a long process of secularization, the early twentieth century is now often viewed as the beginning of “the secularization threat in industrial society.”¹ The period 1900-39 was a “watershed” for many important religious groups,² especially as the “associational ideal” which underpinned the continuing strength of Victorian and Edwardian Christian churches in Britain began to wane. Callum G. Brown, in a more recent contribution to the debate, has argued that the 1960s was the key decade of British secularization, and points to the revival of churchgoing and other manifestations of organized religion and popular religious belief in the period 1945-58.³ However, in spite of this revival, religious and other commentators in the post-second world war period expressed deep concern about the apparent decline of religious belief, and sought various means of revitalising spiritual influences on the population. The religious revival of the period needs to be understood in the context of the Cold War, which was represented in both America and Britain as a struggle between the godlessness of the Communist regimes and the Christian way of life in the West.⁴ As Dianne Kirby and others have shown, the ideological importance of Communism as a “spurious pseudo religion,”⁵ together with the leftwards swing of British politics during and after the second world war, gave the Christian churches an important political role during the early years of the Cold War. At the same time, the shallow capitalist materialism of the Western age of affluence was viewed by the British clergy as a force undermining the extent of religious commitment – and thereby “increasing the nation’s susceptibility to Cold War defeat”⁶ – and compromising the religious elements of national life. This was a period in which both religious and secular leaders attempted to assess the extent and nature of religious influences on the British population. Although there were signs of a revival in the outward observance of religion, an apparent decline in the essentials of Christian belief gave cause for widespread concern about the impact of godlessness on popular morality and civil society, and ultimately about the future of “Christian civilisation.”⁷

Even if the reality and extent of secularization during this period can be questioned, therefore, there were concerns among both religious and secular commentators about its impact. Alan Gilbert has suggested that two kinds of response were possible among the organized Christian churches to secularization or the threat of secularization: resistance, which usually results in a further marginalization of the cultural and social position of the organized churches and often in sectarianism and division, and accommodation, whereby churches come to “endorse the dominant values, norms and assumptions of the wider culture, and to accept the appropriateness of a limited, segmental influence for Christian principles within it.”⁸ Both strategies reflect the concern among the churches to retain their moral authority within British society, in Gilbert’s analysis to recreate the old parochial ideal in which the churches functioned as “basic” institutions, directing both religious and secular life in their

communities.⁹ The demands of accommodation to a secularising society encouraged the churches to act more as “serving” institutions, to seek to exert religious and ethical influence along essentially secular vectors. Such strategies of accommodation embodied a desire on the part of the churches to retain the moral authority they had enjoyed as “basic” institutions. Gilbert points to the expansion in the second half of the twentieth century of the numbers of non-parochial Anglican clergymen: by 1970, some 2,000 served as chaplains in the armed services, in factories, in institutions and so on, and many appeared on the radio and television.¹⁰ The concentration of the non-parochial ministry on the armed services and other areas where young people in particular might be exposed to its moral influence indicates the importance of concerns about the character of the citizenry and the moral impact of the popular recreational activities whose growth was itself viewed as an engine of secularization. Both religious and secular attempts to strengthen the national “character” were important in the context of the second world war and the post-war period, and were often channelled through these secular institutions, especially National Service, workplaces, and community organizations.

This article focuses on one manifestation of the post-second world war concern about the place of the churches and Christianity in British society and in the wider world: an unpublished investigation by B. Seebohm Rowntree and G. Russell Lavers into the “spiritual life of the nation” carried out in the early 1950s. This study – provisionally entitled *Britain’s Spiritual Life: How Can It Be Deepened?*¹¹ – was never published and does not appear to have survived even in manuscript form,¹² but it provides a wealth of information and opinion that illustrates the responses of many religious and secular leaders in British society to the process of secularization which appeared to be occurring in this period. This article locates the investigation in the context of the wider responses to secularization and the Communist influence in this period. Rowntree and Lavers, it will be shown, despaired of the ability of the Christian churches to provide the moral and spiritual leadership necessary in the context of the Cold War and the “materialism” of Western society, and hoped that alternative vectors of religious influence could be used to promote Christianity and its associated ethical principles. They subscribed to a concept of “character” and “moral fibre” which reflected a widespread series of concerns about the moral and cultural character of the British nation whose origins can be located in the muscular Christianity of the Victorian era to which Rowntree, by birth and upbringing, belonged. Their desire that religious influence be redirected through secular channels – an example of accommodation with the dominant secular culture – was reflected in the reliance of their investigation on the evidence of those who were thought to be in a position to ensure that this took place. They were participants, therefore, in a response to secularization that emphasized the decline of popular belief, the impact this had on the moral and cultural lives of the population, and the spiritual remedies that might be available to the already partially secularized Christian churches in an age in which Communism was seen to threaten the social and religious order. Despite their preoccupation with the decline of religious sentiment among the population, the evidence used in the compilation of their unpublished report was overwhelmingly taken from elites rather than from the secularized population itself.

I

Recent historians of Seebohm Rowntree’s contribution to social research have suggested that his poverty surveys “need little introduction.”¹³ The same is true for

the man himself. By 1945 he was a widely respected investigator of poverty, a contributor to the Beveridge scheme of social insurance, and an authority on subjects as diverse as unemployment, agricultural conditions, and supplementary benefit scales.¹⁴ The diversity of his lifelong interests partly explains why it was not until his last years that he turned his investigative attention to the spiritual life of the British nation, a subject which had long interested him, as one of the most prominent members of one of the most prominent Quaker families in Britain. During the last eight years of his life, he had a collaborator about whom much less is known. G. Russell Lavers, who answered Rowntree's advertisement for an assistant in the *Economist* in March 1946, was then aged 35, married with two children, and had just left the Royal Navy, in his own words "in order to seek work connected with social and political reform."¹⁵ Educated at a Plymouth elementary school and Plymouth College, Lavers was reading economics at the University of London. He had worked in naval intelligence during the second world war, and received the OBE in the New Year's Honours List for 1946 in recognition of his work in the early months of the Allied occupation of Germany. He had left the Royal Navy with the rank of Commander, the result of an impressive career in the services but not necessarily an obvious recommendation for a notoriously demanding Quaker employer. Nevertheless, Lavers's experience was attractive to Rowntree – in his letter of application he claimed "several years experience of statistical work"¹⁶ – and he was appointed for a three-month trial period during which Rowntree could test what he called the "spiritual affinity" between the two men.¹⁷ Although the Anglican Lavers, as he later explained, was "a solid churchman needing no new-fangled ideas,"¹⁸ the necessary affinity clearly developed, because the appointment was confirmed, and a strange working relationship between Quaker pacifist¹⁹ and naval commander was instigated. In some ways, it should be added, Lavers's military background was useful to Rowntree for establishing contacts for his inquiries: in subsequent years, when writing to military men, he invariably referred to his assistant as "Commander Lavers."²⁰ The "spiritual affinity" between the ostensibly unlikely collaborators resulted in Rowntree's third social survey of York, published as *Poverty and the Welfare State* in 1951, a book on *English Life and Leisure*, published in the same year, and the unpublished "spiritual life" survey. Given Rowntree's advanced age (he was born in 1871), we can assume that Lavers carried out the bulk of the work for the survey, but, as shown below, Rowntree's interest in the "spiritual life of the nation" can be understood as an essential component of a lifelong concern about the "character" or the "moral fibre" of the British people.

Rowntree and Lavers were by no means the only religious and social commentators who turned their attention to the role of the churches and religious belief in the post-war world. Other studies carried out in this period included a symposium edited by Sir James Marchant entitled *Has the Church Failed?*, published in 1947, consisting of a series of essays by a range of Christian contributors, and Mass-Observation's study of *Puzzled People* (1948), carried out with the support of the humanist Ethical Union, pointing to the spiritual confusion in which the post-war population found itself.²¹ Both sought solutions to the problems associated with secularization – in the case of Marchant's collection the decline of belief and the waning influence of organized Christianity, and in the case of *Puzzled People* the "mental and moral chaos – the chaos of mass democracy" which had generated a spiritual "vacuum" which in turn threatened the ethical system whereby Western society governed itself²² – and both pointed to the importance of new secular institutions through which ethical and spiritual influence might be exerted upon the

population. Rowntree was aware of these: he read *Has the Church Failed?* And annotated it liberally.²³ One particularly heavily annotated contribution was the chapter by John Middleton Murry, which Rowntree and Lavers quoted in *English Life and Leisure*: they were impressed by Murry's claim that the influence and "spiritual authority" of the church was based on an "essential complex of beliefs" among which the "*unum necessarium*" was the belief in life after death, "the resurrection of the body."²⁴ For many reasons, Murry asserted, this belief had waned, and the yearning of humanity for a higher spiritual authority had largely receded: "the assurance of personal salvation in the hereafter which [the church] used to give is no longer passionately desired," or, to put it another way, "[t]he world has outgrown the church."²⁵ Both Murry and another contributor to *Has the Church Failed?* to whose influence Rowntree's numerous annotations testify, the Quaker theology professor Herbert G. Wood, saw the future of organized Christianity in essentially political terms. Wood regretted the lack of leadership taken by the churches on the issue of mass unemployment and other significant social and moral concerns of the previous two decades,²⁶ while Murry saw the future lying in the churches' role as social and community organizations, working to "redeem the anarchy of the secular society by penetrating it at every point" and thereby offering a counterweight to the individualism and materialism that characterized post-war society.²⁷ To use Gilbert's terms, the churches in Murry's vision would become "serving" rather than "basic" institutions. As shown below, the importance of the social role of religion outside the churches would also be emphasized by Rowntree and Lavers in their "spiritual life" study.

A thread that ran throughout Murry's and Woods's contributions to *Has the Church Failed?* was the place of the Christian churches in relation to Communism. This was as important to Quakers as it was to members of other denominations. The third world conference of Friends, held in Oxford in 1952 (the Society's tercentenary) devoted a session to discussing "Christianity in a Revolutionary World," hearing that Communism appealed to the "under-privileged and exploited groups" who were then overthrowing their oppressors, offering them the "messianic hope of a classless society," but that Quakers could not accept the violence that Communism brought with it.²⁸ More important, Quakerism and Communism were doctrinally incompatible: "We deny that Marxism can have the final answer because of its denial of God and His purposes, and its consequent refusal to put emphasis on the individual personality and the life of the spirit."²⁹ Two delegates spoke of how Communist societies "depersonalised" people, although one also noted that western society was similarly damaged by "the atomizing force of materialism."³⁰ Similarly, Murry identified the dangers of Communism, which he saw as being "based upon what can only be called a *religion* of materialism, a Christianity *à rebours*."³¹ Mass-Observation made the same point more obliquely, referring to the widespread spiritual confusion that existed, and asking "how many are in that receptive state where they will only too readily embrace any more tangible earthly substitute for so questionable a heavenly comforter?"³² Although Herbert Wood discerned scope for "co-operation and understanding" between Communists and the churches – at this point in the book Rowntree added "I wonder?" – he also recognized that "[n]o alchemy can turn Marxism into a gospel of peace and goodwill."³³ In this period the Christian way of life was placed at the centre of the struggle between east and west, just as the struggle against Fascism and Nazism had been represented as a fight for the survival of "Christian civilisation."³⁴ The tenuousness of the hold of the churches and Christian belief on the British population had itself been represented during the war as a threat

to civilization;³⁵ and in the aftermath of the war, in Ian Jones's words, Communism was "a useful (and widely acceptable) scapegoat against which clergy could attempt to re-forged the waning connection between religious duty, social participation and national identity."³⁶

Rowntree and Lavers shared the contemporaneous vision of anti-Communism as a moral and religious crusade, closely allied to the domestic crusade against immorality and irreligion. As Rowntree explained in a letter to his former collaborator Viscount Astor in 1949:

I am sure there is a field for useful work in making people realise that the struggle against Communism is a religious struggle and that the very weakness of the Christian Churches at the present time makes a Communist victory far more likely than people imagine. The view is widely held, apparently even in the highest quarters as well as by the uninformed, that the Communist struggle is an economic and political one ... If it is true, as we believe, that civilised men must have something in which to believe, it is at least likely that if they are unable to retain their faith in the Christian Churches, they will turn to what Archbishop Temple called "the Christian heresy of Communism."³⁷

It was partly as a counterweight to Communist influence – and partly against western capitalist materialism – that Rowntree hoped for some kind of religious revival. One possible bulwark against Communism and decadence was "Moral Re-Armament" (MRA), established by Frank Buchman in 1938. MRA's rather Quakerly disposition, together with its anti-Communist stance, attracted Rowntree, and as early as 1947 Lavers was despatched to MRA headquarters, the Mountain House at Caux-sur-Montreux in Switzerland, from where he was able to confirm to his employer that MRA "is activated by exactly the concern that has led us to undertake our present work and that makes us seek a solution to the materialism that threatens the world with a new Dark Ages [*sic*]."³⁸ He was rather averse to the culture of the Mountain House – he told Rowntree that "I don't like pushing the idea of divine inspiration as far as these people do, so that ultimately one could hardly choose lunch in a restaurant without having a 'quiet time' about the menu!"³⁹ – but he appreciated the anti-Communist lectures to which the MRA devotees spent much of their time listening.⁴⁰ On the whole, however, the appeal of MRA in Britain remained rather limited, and Rowntree and Lavers preferred to concentrate their investigative attentions on other vehicles of spiritual influence that might be expected to strengthen the moral character of the British people.

II

The extent and influence of Communism in British society was of stated importance to Rowntree in the context of his inquiries into the "moral fibre of the nation."⁴¹ Much of his time in the 1940s and 1950s was devoted to the investigation of this, or to what he less often but perhaps more revealingly termed the "moral fibre of the working classes." In 1940, for example, he convened a one-day seminar in York "to discuss the question of whether the moral fibre of the working classes had deteriorated during the last 30 or 40 years": a two-hour discussion involved clergymen, employers, the chief constable, workers' representatives, social workers and school teachers.⁴² Except for the chief constable, these people did not think that the "moral fibre of the working classes" had deteriorated as such, but the conference did make it clear that

young people in particular needed to be exposed to “influences which will strengthen their moral fibre.”⁴³ In particular, the importance of playing fields was mentioned, an importance which reflected the efforts of government and voluntary bodies to provide recreational opportunities for British youth in the 1930s. For Rowntree, the word “character” was invested with a meaning that incorporated a measure of the muscular Victorian insistence on “improving” pursuits.⁴⁴ Muscular Christianity was not an ethos with which Quakers would necessarily expect to associate themselves, but Rowntree, a product of the mid-Victorian period himself, evidently subscribed to some of the maxims and rhetoric of the Thomas Hughes school of character-building. In a lecture entitled “Playgrounds,” delivered in 1908, he employed the language of muscular Christianity to emphasize the value of playgrounds and playing fields for children and youths, allowing himself an unQuakerly military allusion: “As regards *Educational* value ... In good well-to-do schools fully recognised. Development of *Character*. (Play for side, not self.) Never know when beaten. (‘Waterloo won on playing fields of Eton.’)”⁴⁵ He believed that more widespread provision of playing areas “would result in improved physique [and] a great increase in the sum of human happiness, a development of character.”⁴⁶ He returned to the same theme in the report of his second social survey of York, published in 1941:

It was claimed that “the battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton.” This suggestion, and the universally understood expression “it isn’t cricket” remind us how important an influence the playing of team games exercises on the formation of character ... games are so important a factor in the building both of character and health...⁴⁷

In the post-war years he was associated with – and was the first president of – the Outward Bound Trust, which can be said to have had quasi-military objectives:⁴⁸ it involved a lot of military men, including Commander Lavers himself, and its spokesmen employed the rhetoric and much of the practice of “character-training.”⁴⁹ So immersed was Rowntree in the drive to improve “character” that his original preferred title for the book which became *English Life and Leisure* was *English Life and Character*.⁵⁰

Rowntree’s understanding of character was not quite of the same order as that adopted by those who trumpeted the widely derided wartime mantras of “Officer-Like Qualities” and “Lack of Moral Fibre.”⁵¹ Rowntree seems to have subscribed to the view of the American Christian progressives of the 1920s, who had optimistically believed that “good character put the law of love into practice and issued forth in service, which in turn would overcome all the social evils resulting from selfishness,” and involved themselves in “a nationwide effort at character education involving the public schools, young people’s organizations such as the Boy Scouts and Campfire Girls, and religious education.”⁵² Rowntree’s Quaker pacificism and his concern for the promotion of a thoughtful but “virile” religious life ensured that his conception of “character” was a profoundly spiritual one,⁵³ although he accepted that it could be strengthened by secular institutions such as Outward Bound, or perhaps even the more militaristic Scout movement. For Rowntree the terms “strengthening the national character,” “toughening the moral fibre of the nation” and “deepening the spiritual life of the nation” were essentially interchangeable. There are many indications of this interchangeability in the documentary relics of the “spiritual life” survey. Writing to the Rector of All Souls, Langham Place, Lavers explained that he and Rowntree were interested in “what measures are practicable to strengthen the national character or, in

Mr Rowntree's Quaker phrase, to deepen the spiritual life of the nation."⁵⁴ Similarly, at the commencement of their interview with Rowntree's fellow Quaker cocoa and confectionery manufacturer Paul Cadbury, Rowntree explained that "he thought our meaning would be clearer if we spoke of strengthening the national character rather than of deepening the spiritual life of the nation"; to this Cadbury replied that a deeper spiritual life was undoubtedly needed, but that a better phrase still would be "strengthening moral fibre."⁵⁵

This interchangeability of terminology was emphasized in the religious chapter of *English Life and Leisure*, which attracted a lot of comment and correspondence. In this important chapter, Rowntree and Lavers asked themselves three questions:

- (a) How far do people in Britain believe that Christianity is relevant to life in a scientific age?
- (b) Since, in the late Sir George Newman's words, "The value of any religion depends upon the ethical dividend that it pays," what is happening to the character of the people of Britain to-day? Is it improving or deteriorating?
- (c) If our factual investigations support the general belief that there is a decline in the observance of the formalities of religion, such as church-going, how far does this decline represent a real deterioration of the nation's religious life? If it is a sign of real deterioration, how can it be reconciled with the growth of humanitarianism, including the vastly increased care now given to even the least vocal sections of the under-privileged, such as the aged?⁵⁶

To answer these questions, a census of church attendance was carried out in York – as Rowntree had done for his social surveys of 1899 and 1936 – and the 975 case studies on which the study was based were drawn upon. In addition, 125 people were interviewed, ranging from members of the Cabinet, through Bishops and clergymen, to "at least two convinced atheists" and schoolmasters, industrialists and journalists.⁵⁷ Question (a) was answered in the negative, although it was asserted that Christian "standards" of life and behaviour remained very important to the vast majority of the population; and question (c) was answered by admitting that the "Christian ethic" did seem to be continuing to animate many secular organs of service, but that there was no guarantee that this would continue to be the case. In effect, Rowntree and Lavers claimed, "[w]e are ... living on the spiritual capital of the past."⁵⁸ The "ethical dividend," then, would not be endlessly renewable. They recognized that "it remains true that in the lives of a large majority of people of all classes of the community the Church is no longer relevant,"⁵⁹ and that, despite the "thoroughly wholesome" influence of religious broadcasting and the "positive work" that was being carried out by religiously-inspired bodies such as the St John's Ambulance Brigade, Dr Barnardo's Homes and even the public National Assistance Board,⁶⁰ the central truths of Christianity were even less relevant. It was held that alternative institutions to the churches, embodying similar spiritual concerns, might do the work of the churches in the future; or in other words might become venues of accommodation for organized religion with the dominant secular culture. As we will see, this theme was carried forward into the "spiritual life" survey.

In their answer to question (b), Rowntree and Lavers showed how, in their view, the "spiritual life of the nation" was bound up with matters of "character" and "moral fibre," although the latter term was not employed in *English Life and Leisure*. As Rowntree had found at his one-day conference on the "moral fibre of the working

classes,” it was difficult to assess the changes over time in the matter of “character,” despite he and Lavers having consulted “many wise and informed persons of both sexes” during their investigations.⁶¹ However, they expressed their concern about “the great resurgence of brutality” that had taken place during both world wars, but especially the second, and in particular the savage bombing of German cities, which “marked a sharp regression in the national character.”⁶² Moreover, they felt that (as had been shown in the chapter of the book entitled “How Honest Is Britain?”) that “there has undoubtedly been a deterioration ... in honesty, and perhaps in truthfulness also”;⁶³ elsewhere in the book they remarked that the extent of “petty dishonesty” was “enough in volume to indicate some lowering of the moral tone of the nation.”⁶⁴ In addition, they identified the spread of gambling, and the increased consumption of alcohol and tobacco, as possible indicators of a deterioration in the “national character”; they felt the same way about sexual promiscuity, another subject which was given a chapter to itself. On the other hand, the spread of adult education, in the form of educational settlements and adult schools (with which Rowntree’s own family was closely associated), the Workers’ Educational Association and the Arts Council, together with the increased popularity of country pursuits, reading and music, all did credit to the “national character” and with it the “spiritual life of the nation”: as Rowntree and Lavers explained, “[t]hese yearnings ... constitute a search for beauty, which is closely related to a yearning for God.”⁶⁵ In the field of service, there had been advances during the first half of the twentieth century in terms of care for the elderly, the weak and the “educationally sub-normal.”⁶⁶ Therefore, Rowntree and Lavers concluded, although the matter was not really susceptible of objective assessment, and barely mentioning the outwardly religious concerns that were the declared subject-matter of their chapter, that some “essential virtues” in Britain were in decline while others were being strengthened, and that the balance may be on the side of an improved “national character.”⁶⁷

There remained, however, what Rowntree and Lavers identified as a spiritual crisis. This crisis was closely associated with concerns about personal morality: as Rowntree explained, when researching *English Life and Leisure*, “we were struck by the large proportion of people who were living useless lives and the large amount of sexual promiscuity, and the extraordinary feebleness of our churches.”⁶⁸ Although the churches themselves, especially to a Quaker such as Rowntree, were not necessarily essential to the reinvigoration of the “spiritual life of the nation,” it did not seem likely that any other spiritual investment would produce the same “ethical dividend” that could be obtained from a revitalized Christianity. In effect, there had been a decline in popular subscription to the central tenets of Christian belief. Empirical evidence for this had been presented to readers of *English Life and Leisure*: Rowntree and Lavers asked “about 150” people aged 18-30 whether they believed “in any form of life of life after death,” to which 49% answered in the affirmative, and “half of these so modified their answers as to make it clear that they had in mind various forms of survival that did not necessarily amount to a continued personal existence.”⁶⁹ Lavers, in a memorandum to Rowntree in November 1951, explained the implications of this in stark terms:

the main problem of the day is how to deepen the spiritual life of the nation ... we are not facing an internal crisis in our religious system but an external crisis of the system itself. It is a crisis of belief. I suggest that only a tiny minority of people to-day believe in a personal survival of death, and without such a belief the Christian religion has no supernatural authority ... The problem we in

Britain have to face is that by the almost complete and probably permanent rejection of Christianity as a divinely ordained religion, we have lost both the mainspring of all that was best in private and public endeavour, and the absolute standard of values by which action could be judged. For a while a civilisation in such a plight as I describe can continue through its own inertia, but after a comparatively short time either a new system of belief must be found, or the civilisation concerned will disintegrate.⁷⁰

This echoed the findings of Mass-Observation's study of *Puzzled People*, which showed that, although a majority of their interviewees "did believe, or believed more or less" in some kind of deity, nearly half of those who believed in God doubted the existence of life after death, as did 46% of those who attended Church of England services.⁷¹ Like Rowntree and Lavers, these investigators found that ethical remnants of Christianity remained widespread in popular belief, but that the clear guiding principles afforded by the foundations of Christianity had largely disappeared.⁷² Moreover, the younger generation were much less likely to believe, and much less likely to participate in the associational life that was often attached to the activities of the churches. Although the sponsors of this survey, unlike Rowntree and Lavers, did not view Christian belief as a necessary or even desirable component of ethical righteousness, it was clear to them that, as spiritual belief became more individual and more remote from the churches, the actual religious foundations of the ethical system that remained were unclear to the majority who continued to subscribe to and abide by that system, and it was unclear how persistent this ethical system would be if faith in God continued to be eroded.⁷³ This, as much as the totalitarian threat of Nazism or Communism, posed a threat to "Christian civilisation."

III

The concerns held by Rowntree and Lavers, then, were articulated within a framework of discussion that shaped the wider deliberations of the Christian churches in this period, and in particular the fear that the churches were "losing the initiative in working class life."⁷⁴ It was from those who Rowntree and Lavers believed might retake this initiative that they took the information and opinion on which their "spiritual life" survey was based. They approached the question in the same way as they had researched the religious chapter of *English Life and Leisure*. Like many investigators and subsequent historians of secularization in Britain, Rowntree and Lavers relied on "middle-class comment":⁷⁵ they interviewed between sixty and seventy "very carefully chosen people," including clergymen, ministers and Roman Catholic priests,⁷⁶ along with many individuals who were not ministers of religion, such as the manufacturer Paul Cadbury; the warden of Toynbee Hall James Mallon; General Sir Bernard Paget, former chief of general staff to the home forces and commander-in-chief of the Middle East force; the industrialists Sir George Schuster, the Earl of Verulam and John Marsh of the Industrial Welfare Society; and the social reformer and educationalist Violet Markham.⁷⁷ The interviewees also included the Reverend J. H. Oldham, a key figure in the ecumenical movement and editor of the *Christian News Letter*; Archdeacon Chamberlain, the Chaplain of the Fleet; W. Arnold Hall, secretary of the Quaker-inspired National Adult School Union; and Sir Henry Self, president of the Congregationalist Modern Churchmen's Union.

This eclectic mix of interviewees delivered a range of verdicts on the state of the "spiritual life of the nation," each from his or her own social and religious

perspective. They represented a set of elites chosen for their presumed ability to comment authoritatively on the religious and spiritual life of the population. Unlike Mass-Observation, there were no direct interviews with those whose spiritual life was under investigation. To obtain the detailed information that was sought, an extremely subtle approach would have been required, and it is fair to say that, whatever the many strengths of Rowntree and Lavers as social investigators, these strengths did not include the sensitive questioning of working-class interviewees. It is easy to see why such an interviewee might not appreciate being asked about the toughness of his or her moral fibre or the strength of his or her character. More important, the remedial action which Rowntree and Lavers believed necessary to solve the perceived crisis was to be led by the social groups who were represented by their interviewees for the “spiritual life” survey: they were convinced that “the Churches *in their present form*” would never reclaim the loyalty of the people: although this in no way meant that churchmen of all denominations would be redundant in the future, it clearly meant that different avenues of religious influence needed to be explored.⁷⁸ For Rowntree and Lavers, in the projected “spiritual life” book, these avenues included the home, the press, the cinema, radio and television, and also the three which will now be considered in more detail: communal organizations including schools and community centres; workplaces; and the military.⁷⁹

Under the heading of “communal organisations” Rowntree and Lavers included schools, community centres, village halls, youth clubs, the Youth Hostels Association, the Outward Bound Trust and Women’s Institutes.⁸⁰ As noted above, Rowntree was the first president of Outward Bound, an organization whose leaders included “character-training” among their specified objectives.⁸¹ There was also a religious dimension to Outward Bound, and this was emphasized by many of its pioneers. The Trust’s first statement of aims declared that “Short-Term Character Training Schools for boys should form an integral part of youth education, acting as a power unit for service to the community ... They must be ... based on a spiritual foundation.”⁸² Many of the Trust’s residential schools accompanied the physical and mental challenges to which boys (and later girls) were subjected with a daily prayer session, to emphasize this spiritual dimension of their work. Rowntree and Lavers interviewed the Earl of Verulam, chairman of Enfield Rolling Mills, who saw in Outward Bound and other youth organizations the means of “strengthening national character”: Verulam saw these as filling the gap caused by the decline of religious influence, which had led to increased incidences of drunkenness and sexual promiscuity.⁸³ If the churches had lost their hold over the people, these institutions aimed at improving the “character” of the working classes could do something to fill the gap. More important still were the community centres and associated institutions in the promotion of which the Rowntree family, through the medium of the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust (JRCT) and latterly the Joseph Rowntree Village Trust, had invested a good deal of time and money during the previous twenty years. The community centres movement had close links with the educational settlements, adult education institutions which the JRCT had consistently supported since the establishment of the first in 1909, but from which they had recently begun to withdraw.⁸⁴ As early as 1919 Rowntree’s father Joseph, in a memorandum to the trustees of the JRCT, had pointed to the decline of the influence of the churches, and suggested a role for the educational settlements in shaping “the spiritual fellowships of the future.”⁸⁵ Although by the early 1950s it had become clear that community centres and similar bodies had failed to promote spiritual fellowship,⁸⁶ these new institutions were viewed by a range of observers as possible avenues of cultural

influence whereby the “vacuum” left by the “decay of popular belief in orthodox Christianity” might be filled.⁸⁷ As H. J. Blackham of the Ethical Union announced in his preface to *Puzzled People*,

The leaders of thought, and their followers, should be thinking far less of converting the masses to their views than of influencing their practice (their behaviour, their habits, their interests) by influencing their situation, by taking part themselves in the creation of new forms and opportunities of social life. The principles of Christianity and the principles of liberal nationalism have failed to save the masses from desultory living. Any other ideology will succeed no better. It remains for us to see what transforming the conditions of life and thought will do, by wise and large application of the principles of the Peckham Health Centre, of the Community Centres and Village Colleges, of Town and Country Planning, of the new Education Act.⁸⁸

Even a convinced secularist such as Blackham, then, recognized in the new educational and social institutions with which the Rowntrees and others were associated the possibility of ethical regeneration and the renewal of the “ethical dividend.” As such, communal organizations represented a key area in which strategies of accommodation to a secularized culture could be employed, and religious and other cultural influences could be exerted.

The second important area in which Rowntree and Lavers identified opportunities for “deepening the spiritual life of the nation” was in the practice of industry, a field in which Rowntree had published many thousands of words and was highly influential.⁸⁹ He had been involved in the establishment of the Management Research Groups, and was president of the Industrial Welfare Society, and his work in promoting workplace welfare, both in his own factory and in his role at the Ministry of Munitions during the first world war, are well known.⁹⁰ In none of this work was the religious or spiritual dimension particularly remarkable, but when Rowntree and Lavers came to interview informants for the “spiritual life” survey it quickly became clear that industry represented a potentially fruitful avenue of spiritual service. As noted above, an important feature of their interviewees was that many were industrialists or management experts, and a number of these pointed to the opportunities that existed in workplaces for the promotion of a more active Christian life. For example, George Goyder, managing director of British International Paper Ltd and author of *The Future of Private Enterprise*, regretted both the decline in Bible reading and the commercialization of mass culture, which he thought spoiled “individual character,” and saw industry as the arena where “the greatest struggle to re-establish a moral order” must take place.⁹¹ Other interviewees pointed to the potential of the system of factory chaplains. Although not all were impressed with it,⁹² John Marsh of the Industrial Welfare Society liked the system, and saw further possibilities in the expanding numbers of personnel officers, of whom there were some 10,000 in England: “it was hardly too much in his view to regard personnel officers as possibly the priests of a revived religious life.”⁹³ He approved of the 362 factory chaplains in Scotland, who also worked as parish ministers. Sir George Schuster, author of *Christianity and Human Relations in Industry*, went even further, calling the existing parochial system anachronistic, and suggesting that workplaces should be used systematically to “spread religious belief.”⁹⁴ Behind all this interest in workplace spiritual welfare lay a concern for industrial efficiency and peaceful industrial relations, another long-standing interest of Rowntree’s, and a reflection of

the anti-Communist slant of the investigation. One interviewee, Father J. B. Grosser of Stepney, spoke of “the state of chaos and breakdown of discipline,” which he dated, significantly, “at least from 1926,” the year of the general strike.⁹⁵ Like a significant proportion of the Anglican clergy,⁹⁶ Rowntree was suspicious of militant trade unionism and hostile to the extent of state planning that was pursued by the post-war Labour governments.⁹⁷ The improvement of “character” would serve to improve industrial and social discipline, and thus limit the appeal of political militancy; it would also help to generate a more robust spiritual life among the industrial workforce.

Perhaps the most problematic of all areas of spiritual influence, for Rowntree in particular, was the military, and in particular National Service, an experience whose importance, good or ill, for the development of young men’s character was recognized by both its supporters and opponents. Here, again, the promotion of the efficiency of the workforce was intertwined with the strengthening of character and the promotion of the nation’s “spiritual life.” Rowntree remarked that “[o]bviously one of the factors to be taken into account is the effect of National Service upon young men since they are taken for two years when they are at an impressionable age and great good or harm might accrue”;⁹⁸ and he acknowledged that, in view of National Service, the armed forces had “a particularly important part to play in the field of character development.”⁹⁹ Rowntree was a liberal internationalist, or pacifist, rather than an absolutist Quaker pacifist,¹⁰⁰ and although he abhorred the brutalising consequences of war he seems to have reluctantly accepted the institution of National Service as a regrettable necessity in post-war Britain, and to have acknowledged its potential usefulness as a vehicle of character-training. Although his interviewees and correspondents were divided in their opinion of the impact of National Service on young working-class men – one told him that in many cases the experience had “had the effect of making them more responsible individuals,”¹⁰¹ while others, including Rowntree’s son Philip, disagreed¹⁰² – it was widely agreed that the character-training and spiritual development offered by the services could and should be improved. The comments of military and religious authorities on the religious ignorance of National Servicemen were striking: Archdeacon Chamberlain told Rowntree and Lavers that about a fifth of boys who entered the Navy did not know the Lord’s Prayer;¹⁰³ and Rowntree kept a copy of an article in *The Times* by Lord Montgomery of El-Alamein which reversed Chamberlain’s claim, suggesting that fewer than a quarter of naval recruits *could* recite the Lord’s Prayer.¹⁰⁴ Chamberlain was concerned at the “complete futility in [National Servicemen’s] leisure time occupations, which was [*sic*] concerned mainly with the radio as a background noise”; and this prompted Rowntree to note that National Service entailed an important role for service chaplains such as Chamberlain,¹⁰⁵ who might perform a role analogous to that of the industrial chaplains in working-class civilian life. As explained above, this dispersal of clerical energies into secular institutions has been a feature of the response of the churches to secularization. It was unlikely that such ministries could, in Gilbert’s words, “function as authentic ‘churches’, with full sacramental prerogatives,”¹⁰⁶ but they could exert spiritual and moral guidance over young men at a crucial period of their lives, guidance which could be as much secular as it was religious, and which emphasized the fact that the church itself was becoming secularized. Indeed, the most striking feature of the National Service material in the “spiritual life” papers is how rarely the correspondence and interviews explicitly addressed the subjects of religion and spirituality, although comments about “character” were frequent. The stated aim of the proposed chapter on National Service was to ask “[h]ow far does national

service provide an opportunity for character development[?],”¹⁰⁷ reflecting once again the close connection that was drawn between character and spiritual life, and perhaps also illustrating the tensions that existed when a decorated officer and a lifelong Quaker collaborated in the investigation of military matters.

IV

What all these potential vectors of spiritual influence had in common was that along each of them this influence would be exerted upon the working-class (and to a lesser extent the middle-class) population by social, industrial and military elites whose cultural perspectives had much more in common with Rowntree and Lavers’s own than with those of the men and women they were charged with influencing. Although Rowntree’s concern for the “spiritual life of the nation” stemmed from a genuine Quaker belief in the potential for God in all, his proposals for the spiritual regeneration of British life can be viewed as vehicles of social and moral control in the Cold War context. If the concern for spirituality distanced him from the more militaristic advocates of “moral fibre” and “character,” his own subscription to this terminology located his concern for spirituality squarely within a wider set of moral and political concerns, shared by the religious, industrial and military elites on whose evidence the projected “spiritual life” survey was to be based. The survey, then, was a response to secularization, or the threat of secularization, which identified moral and cultural dangers in the decreasing influence of religious belief in the lives of the people, and sought accommodation with the secular culture in order that an element of moral authority might be retained and used to advantage by the organized Christian churches. This project was of particular importance at the grassroots level of the struggle against Communism, and reflected the Anglo-American encouragement of a view of the Cold War that cast the Soviet regime as anti-Christian. As Ian Jones has shown, the Cold War presented “important pastoral challenges” to the Anglican clergy, striking at the heart of the role of religion in British society and national life.¹⁰⁸ However, the Rowntree and Lavers survey can also be seen as an indirect result of the discomfiting “materialism” that had descended on western culture with the spread of mass democracy, the growth of real incomes and the institution of the post-war welfare state. Despite their hope for some kind of fundamental revival of Christian belief to counter this “materialism,” Rowntree and Lavers despaired of any such revival emanating from the people themselves, and looked instead to traditional areas of cultural influence such as the workplace and the military, from where many of their interviewees came. The investigation was a response to secularization which saw considerable social, moral and political dangers in the apparently declining influence of religious belief in the lives of the people, and emphasized, for Rowntree and for many of his contemporaries, the interchangeability of the phrases “strengthening the moral fibre” and “deepening the spiritual life” of the nation.

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- ¹ Callum G. Brown, "Review Essay: Religion in the City," *Urban History* 23 (1996): 375.
- ² John Wolffe, "Religion and 'Secularization'," in Paul Johnson (ed.), *Twentieth-Century Britain: Economic, Social and Cultural Change* (London: Longman, 1994), 428.
- ³ Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 170-5.
- ⁴ Dianne Kirby, "Religion and the Cold War: An Introduction," in Dianne Kirby (ed.), *Religion and the Cold War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 1-22; Owen Chadwick, *The Christian Church in the Cold War* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), esp. chapter 6.
- ⁵ Kirby, "Religion," 5.
- ⁶ Ian Jones, "The Clergy, the Cold War and the Mission of the Local Church: England ca. 1945-60," in Kirby, *Religion*, 192; Kirby, "Religion," 17.
- ⁷ Keith Robbins, *History, Religion and Identity in Modern Britain* (London: Hambledon Press, 1993), 195-213.
- ⁸ Alan Gilbert, *The Making of Post-Christian Britain: A History of the Secularization of Modern Society* (London and New York: Longman, 1980), 102-4.
- ⁹ Gilbert, 110-11.
- ¹⁰ Gilbert, 84-5.
- ¹¹ "Notes for JRCT Meeting," n.d. [1954], BSR1980/JRCT REPORTS/7, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York (JRF).
- ¹² There were three manuscripts by October 1954, but by this time, after Rowntree's death, Lavers was content to drop the project: Peter Rowntree to Roger Cowan Wilson, 11 October 1954, BSR1980/GENERAL/12.
- ¹³ Timothy J. Hatton and Roy E. Bailey, "Seebohm Rowntree and the Post-War Poverty Puzzle," *Economic History Review* 2nd ser. 53 (2000): 519.
- ¹⁴ The only full length study of Rowntree is Asa Briggs, *Social Thought and Social Action: A Study of the Work of Seebohm Rowntree* (London: Longmans, 1961).
- ¹⁵ Lavers to Rowntree, 23 March 1946, BSR1980/LAVERS LETTERS.
- ¹⁶ Lavers to Rowntree, 23 March 1946.
- ¹⁷ Rowntree to Lavers, 5 April 1946, BSR1980/LAVERS LETTERS.
- ¹⁸ Lavers to Rowntree, 20 July 1947, SLN/1/2, Rowntree papers, Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, York (BIHR).
- ¹⁹ I have used the word pacifist, in contrast to pacifist, following the definitions established by Martin Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain 1914-1945: The Defining of a Faith* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), 3, citing A. J. P. Taylor, *The Trouble Makers* (London: H. Hamilton, 1957), 51 n.
- ²⁰ See for example Rowntree to General Sir Bernard Paget, 11 November 1952, SLN/3; Rowntree to Sir John Slessor, 16 March 1953, SLN/1/1.
- ²¹ *Has the Church Failed?* (ed. Sir James Marchant, London: Odhams, 1947); Mass-Observation, *Puzzled People: A Study in Popular Attitudes to Religion, Ethics, Progress and Politics in a London Borough, Prepared for the Ethical Union* (London: Gollancz, 1948).
- ²² Mass-Observation, 7.
- ²³ Rowntree's copy, shelfmark C.80.MAR, J. B. Morrell Library, University of York.
- ²⁴ *Has the Church Failed?*, 67; B. Seebohm Rowntree and G. R. Lavers, *English Life and Leisure: A Social Study* (London: Longmans, Green, 1951), 353.

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- ²⁵ *Has the Church Failed?*, 74.
- ²⁶ *Has the Church Failed?*, 156.
- ²⁷ *Has the Church Failed?*, 73-6.
- ²⁸ *Friends Face Their Fourth Century: The Third World Conference of Friends* (London: Friends World Committee for Consultation, 1952), 55-7.
- ²⁹ *Friends Face Their Fourth Century*, 56.
- ³⁰ *Friends Face Their Fourth Century*, 67, 68.
- ³¹ *Has the Church Failed?*, 71. Original emphasis.
- ³² Mass-Observation, 26.
- ³³ *Has the Church Failed?*, 158-9.
- ³⁴ Robbins, 195-213.
- ³⁵ Robbins, esp. 201-2.
- ³⁶ Jones, 195.
- ³⁷ Rowntree to Astor, 4 March 1949, SLN/1/1.
- ³⁸ Lavers to Rowntree, 21 July 1947, SLN1/2.
- ³⁹ Lavers to Rowntree, 20 July 1947, SLN1/2.
- ⁴⁰ Lavers to Rowntree, 23 July 1947, SLN1/2.
- ⁴¹ Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, "Review of Operations for the Year 1947," JRCT93/I/11 (b), JRF.
- ⁴² Rowntree to S. J. Marriott, 8 August 1940, BSR1980/LAST YEARS.
- ⁴³ Rowntree to Marriott, 8 August 1940.
- ⁴⁴ Stefan Collini, "The Idea of Character in Victorian Political Thought," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5th ser. 35 (1985): 29-50.
- ⁴⁵ B. S. Rowntree, 'Playgrounds', LEC/24/1, BIHR. Original emphasis.
- ⁴⁶ Rowntree, 'Playgrounds'.
- ⁴⁷ B. Seebohm Rowntree, *Poverty and Progress: A Second Social Survey of York* (London: Longmans, Green, 1941), 391.
- ⁴⁸ Mark Freeman, 'Muscular Quakerism? Seebohm Rowntree and the "Moral Fibre of the Working Classes"', unpublished paper, Social History Society Annual Conference, University of Leicester, January 2003.
- ⁴⁹ *Outward Bound* (ed. David James, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957); Freeman, 'Muscular Quakerism?'
- ⁵⁰ Lavers to Rowntree, 14 July 1949, BSR1980/LAVERS LETTERS.
- ⁵¹ *Outward Bound*, 86-7.
- ⁵² Heather A. Warren, "The Shift from Character to Personality in Mainline Protestant Thought 1935-1945," *Church History* 67 (1998): 539.
- ⁵³ Rowntree to Peter Rowntree, 17 March 1940, BSR93/X/8 (c).
- ⁵⁴ Lavers to Revd J. R. W. Scott, 13 May 1953, SLN/1/1. See also Lavers to Bishop of Willesden, 1 April 1953, SLN/3.
- ⁵⁵ Aide-memoire of meeting with Paul Cadbury, 23 October 1952, SLN/2/3.
- ⁵⁶ Rowntree and Lavers, 339-40.
- ⁵⁷ Rowntree and Lavers, 340.
- ⁵⁸ Rowntree and Lavers, 372.
- ⁵⁹ Rowntree and Lavers, 352.
- ⁶⁰ Rowntree and Lavers, 356-7, 364.
- ⁶¹ Rowntree and Lavers, 369.
- ⁶² Rowntree and Lavers, 369-70.
- ⁶³ Rowntree and Lavers, 370.
- ⁶⁴ Rowntree and Lavers, 226.

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- ⁶⁵ Rowntree and Lavers, 370.
- ⁶⁶ Rowntree and Lavers, 371.
- ⁶⁷ Rowntree and Lavers, 371.
- ⁶⁸ Rowntree to Joyce Hildreth, 28 December 1953, SLN/1/1.
- ⁶⁹ Rowntree and Lavers, 353.
- ⁷⁰ G. R. Lavers, "The Spiritual Life of the Nation," 8 November 1951, SLN/2/1.
Original emphasis.
- ⁷¹ Mass-Observation, 21, 27.
- ⁷² Mass-Observation, 75-6.
- ⁷³ Mass-Observation, 96-7.
- ⁷⁴ W. G. Symons, "Ecumenical Christianity," *Christian News Letter* supplement, 30 July 1941, SLN/1/5: this phrase was underlined by Rowntree.
- ⁷⁵ Brown, *Death*, 27.
- ⁷⁶ Rowntree to Joyce Hildreth, 28 December 1953, SLN/1/1.
- ⁷⁷ By this time Mrs James Carruthers.
- ⁷⁸ Rowntree and Lavers, 367. Original emphasis.
- ⁷⁹ "Draft Format of the Book on Deepening the Spritual Life," SLN/2/2.
- ⁸⁰ "Draft Format."
- ⁸¹ *Outward Bound*, 25.
- ⁸² *Outward Bound*, 25.
- ⁸³ Aide-memoire of meeting with the Earl of Verulam, 7 November 1952, SLN/2/3.
- ⁸⁴ See Mark Freeman, "'No Finer School than a Settlement': The Development of the Educational Settlement Movement," *History of Education* 31 (2002): 245-62; Mark Freeman, *The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust: A Study in Quaker Philanthropy and Adult Education 1904-1954* (York: William Sessions, 2004).
- ⁸⁵ Freeman, "'No Finer School'," 260.
- ⁸⁶ Jonathan S. Davies and Mark Freeman, "Education for Citizenship: The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and the Educational Settlement Movement," *History of Education* 32 (2003): 303-18; Freeman, *Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust*, 199-204.
- ⁸⁷ Mass-Observation, 8.
- ⁸⁸ Mass-Observation, 8.
- ⁸⁹ See for example B. Seebohm Rowntree, *The Human Factor in Business* (London: Longmans, 1921).
- ⁹⁰ Briggs, 86-111.
- ⁹¹ Aide-memoire of meeting with George Goyder, 22 December 1952, SLN/2/3.
- ⁹² Aide-memoire of meeting with Sir Henry Self, 12 December 1952, SLN/2/3.
- ⁹³ Aide-memoire of meeting with John Marsh, 18 March 1952, SLN/2/3.
- ⁹⁴ Aide-memoire of meeting with Sir George Schuster, 8 July 1952, SLN/2/3.
- ⁹⁵ Aide-memoire of meeting with Father J. B. Grosser, SLN/2/3.
- ⁹⁶ Jones, 190-1.
- ⁹⁷ Freeman, *Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust*, 140-1.
- ⁹⁸ Rowntree to W. F. F. Scott, 1 January 1954, SLN/4/1.
- ⁹⁹ Rowntree to Sir John Slessor, 16 March 1953, SLN/1/1.
- ¹⁰⁰ Freeman, *Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust*, 161-2.
- ¹⁰¹ Memorandum of 11 October 1953, enclosed with Sir Charles Renold to Rowntree, 16 November 1953, SLN/4.
- ¹⁰² Philip Rowntree to Seebohm Rowntree, 5 November 1953, SLN/4/1.
- ¹⁰³ Aide-memoire of meeting with Archdeacon Chamberlain, 22 September 1952, SLN/2/3.

¹⁰⁴ Field-Marshal Lord Montgomery of El-Alamein, “Youth and the Nation,” *The Times* 5 April 1947, press cutting, SCS/5, BIHR.

¹⁰⁵ Aide-memoire of meeting with Archdeacon Chamberlain.

¹⁰⁶ Gilbert, 85.

¹⁰⁷ “Draft Format of the Book on Deepening the Spritual Life.”

¹⁰⁸ Jones, 192.