PROFILE
PROPHET OF RECONCILIATION:
RICHARD ROBERTS (1874-1945)

by Michael Bourgeois

Preacher, theologian, and sixth moderator of The United Church of Canada (1934-36), Richard Roberts was born in 1874 in Blaenau Ffestiniog in northern Wales.¹ His mother was the daughter of a shipping clerk and his father a slate quarry worker who became a respected minister in the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Church. Although Richard Roberts had a solid bond with his father, his early relationship with Christianity was not close. His conversion process took place over several months in 1892 during his studies at University College of Wales, Aberystwyth. He began to consider whether he should become a preacher, became a candidate for ministry, and planned to study theology after completing a degree in science. Because his poor eyesight hindered his ability

to do dissection and other lab work, however, he twice failed his exams. Although discouraged, he nevertheless began theological studies at Bala in the autumn of 1894.²

Upon completing his theological studies in 1896, Roberts joined the Calvinist Methodist Church's Forward Movement, working in the coal fields and seaports in southern Wales where he quickly related the gospel of Jesus Christ to the realities of economic injustice. Roberts had also been converted to socialism at college but, in his words, 'got into the thick of the fight' after a theological course. At Newport, his second Forward Movement posting, the local Independent Labour Party secretary was his friend and attended his services, but Roberts "suspected that there was a certain anti-religious animus at the back of his mind." One Sunday evening he surprised Roberts by remaining for the "after-meeting, to which were invited those who desired to begin a new life", but did not speak when Roberts issued the "usual call to any who were moved to begin a new life and desired our prayers, to declare themselves." Nevertheless, at the end of the meeting his friend remained after everyone else had departed, and when Roberts approached and spoke to him:

He burst into tears, and I could get nothing out of him. So I suggested that we should pray together. We knelt, side by side, and I prayed simply to God that we might both dedicate ourselves to His service. We remained there kneeling a while longer, and then rose. We looked each other in the face—and then, suddenly, he almost shouted at me, "I AM GOING TO BE A BETTER SOCIALIST THAN EVER!" Which was as it should be.³

Roberts was ordained in September 1897 and shortly thereafter recalled to Bala to assist the school's principal. He accepted a call to the Willesden Green Welsh Church in London in 1900. The following year he married Anne Catherine Thomas, a native of Wales whom he had met in London, and with whom he would raise three daughters, Dorothy, Margaret, and Gwen. In 1903 he

² Norman, pp. 3-28.
transferred to the Presbyterian Church of England and became minister at St. Paul's Church, Westbourne Grove, London, where he made the acquaintance of Roman Catholic philosopher of religion Baron Friedrich von Hugel. In 1910 Roberts was called to Crouch Hill Presbyterian Church, where one of the members of the congregation was the young John Macmurray, with whom Roberts was to become closely acquainted and whose later religious and philosophical writing would influence Roberts's own theology.

When the "Great War" erupted in August 1914, Roberts was attending a conference of the Presbyterian Fellowship and he returned to London in order to preach at Crouch Hill the following Sunday. He had prepared a sermon, "a potpourri of my own conflicting emotions", but did not deliver it for he realized during the service that the young German men who had been attending Crouch Hill were not present. "I had a shattering intuition that perhaps my boys, the British and the German, might meet on some battlefield in Europe, where it would be their business to kill one another!"

Instead of preaching, Roberts reported this intuition and asked those present to consider as Christians the appalling circumstance that lads of that congregation, who had worshipped God together in that church, might, under the orders of their superiors, be called to murder each other. . . . I knew when I left the church that morning that as a minister of Christ I could take no part in a war.4

While he was not alone in this conviction, Roberts certainly was in a minority. With a fervour that approached the feverish, support for the war quickly enveloped England and threatened also to overtake the churches. One contemporary described English Christianity's uncritical support for the war as "this Gadarene-swine race of the churches down a steep place into the sea".5

4 Roberts, "How the Fellowship Began," Fellowship 9 (January 1943) p. 3, also found in Box 4, File 98, Richard Roberts Papers, United Church/Victoria University Archives; and Norman, p. 83.

5 Norman, p. 87.
ertheless, some in the churches sought alternative responses. Roberts convened a meeting at his home of "younger ministers and laymen of the Anglican and Free Churches" who had become acquainted through the Student Christian Movement. Resolving "to do something to safeguard the Christian faith and testimony from being swamped by what [at that time] seemed likely to be the greatest war in history," they began to publish a series of Papers for Wartime. Roberts wrote the second paper, entitled "Are We Worth Fighting For?" When later papers in the series demonstrated "a strong drift" to supporting the war, Roberts and Henry Hodgkin, the group's lone Quaker, took steps to "create another body that would be more forthright in maintaining the Christian front during the war".6

By the end of December 1914, with the help of Quaker Lucy Gardner and others, they had established the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Roberts himself seems to have suggested the word "reconciliation", not only for the new fellowship's name but also as the task to which they understood themselves committed. According to Roberts, as they had tried "to work out a Christian pacifist philosophy that could be accepted by the group" they had recognized that:

For us peace was something to be waged, as war was waged. Peace is not a passivity, a state or rest, a lull between wars. It must be conceived as an activity; and the name of that activity is Reconciliation, which is the finest of all arts, the art and practice of turning enemies into friends. It is the essential core of Christian divinity and of Christian ethics. Its chief exemplar is God — and its classical statement is to be found in St. Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthian Church. . . . It is the fundamental principle by which we should regulate our public relations, our politics, whether domestic or international, and our commercial and professional concerns. . . That is the will of God, that men should be reconciled to Him and to one another.7


Roberts's pacifism and other congregational tensions led to his resignation from Crouch Hill in July 1915, whereupon he became Secretary of the FOR and the first editor of its monthly journal, *The Venturer*. This work led him in 1917 to ministry at the Church of the Pilgrims in Brooklyn, New York, where he was to work part time while also advancing the work of the FOR in the United States. After a trial period on contract there in 1916, he began a longer term appointment in January 1917, three months before the United States entered the war.\(^8\)

After the war's end in 1918 Roberts considered employment options in both England and North America, but nothing definite emerged until he was called to the American Presbyterian Church in Montreal in late 1921. With it he was received into The United Church of Canada in June 1925, in the first action of the first General Council following the signing of the new church's Basis of Union.\(^9\) His ecumenism had been reflected earlier not only in his friendship and work with Catholics, Anglicans, and Quakers, but also in his involvement with organizations such as the Free Church Federation, of which he was president in 1912, and the Free Church Fellowship, the members of which "gave themselves up to the dream of a United Free Church of England and, beyond that, One Universal Church".\(^10\) After 1925, Roberts devoted this enthusiasm for the church's unity and mission in the world to The United Church of Canada.

Roberts was called to Sherbourne United Church in Toronto in 1927 and remained there until 1938. His work during this time was marked by attention to evangelism, social service, and economic justice. At the General Council of 1932, during the Great Depression, Roberts called for the establishment of a Commission on Christianizing the Social Order and during the subsequent two years helped the Commission's chair, Sir Robert Falconer, draft

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\(^8\) Ibid.; Norman, pp. 97-106; and Socknat, p. 100.
\(^10\) Norman, p. 78.
the report. He was elected the United Church’s sixth moderator at the 1934 General Council, and during the next two years travelled extensively on evangelistic missions across Canada. Although not a member of the Fellowship for a Christian Social Order he was sympathetic to its work and wrote the short foreword to its 1936 book, *Towards the Christian Revolution*, which he described as "a very important contribution to the current discussion of the ends and values of a Christian society, and the ways and means of achieving it".  

While Roberts had been writing books and pamphlets on a variety of topics for many years, in the late 1920s he began to articulate his wider theological perspective. In part because of his abiding interest in science and the natural world, in essays and lectures during this time he reflected on the inadequacy of both fundamentalist and liberal evangelical theologies in coming to terms with evolution. According to Roberts, while fundamentalist evangelicals failed to address the proper implications of evolution for divine immanence, liberal evangelicals neglected due consideration of divine transcendence. Roberts therefore attempted to clarify the issues at stake in a way that, while not offering a final synthesis, might at least on the basis of a "provisional dualism" point the way toward a more adequate understanding of divine immanence and transcendence and their relation to evolution. Such a theology, Roberts hoped, would better enable Protestant Christianity to articulate the meaning of its affirmation of God as creator and sustainer of the universe in terms persuasive in the twentieth century, and thus enable it to continue to evangelize men and women, to evoke in them a "holy discontent" for the creation of the "Beloved Community". In these writings Roberts also demonstrated that his commitment to reconciliation was much broader than its specific use in the context of pacifism and non-violence.

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A prominent theme in his theology is the need to reconcile or at least hold in tension various ideas — the personal and the social, divine immanence and transcendence, evolution and creation, evangelism and social service, Karl Barth's emphasis on revelation and John Macmurray's emphasis on community. Roberts sought a theology that held together the authentic points of the various dualities that he observed persisting throughout Christian history.  

As war approached again in 1939, Roberts was in Halifax lecturing at Pine Hill Divinity School. He had agreed to add his name to a public declaration against war but had counselled against issuing one because statements by the United Church in 1938 were, to his mind, "so great an advance on any comparable document in 1914". By 1939, however, the church's attitude began to shift towards supporting the war and when the "Witness Against War" appeared it included his name among its seventy-five signatures. In the ensuing controversy, the attorney general of Ontario threatened prosecution but ultimately only condemned the "Witness" at a press conference and entrusted the United Church with an appropriate disciplinary response. The statement from the General Council sub-executive, issued on the same day, attempted to strike a balance but succeeded in pleasing few. Roberts felt that the controversy had justified his counsel against making a public statement at that time, but also that the action of the United Church's


13 "Witness Against War' Papers," (Box 3, File 64, Richard Roberts Papers, United Church/Victoria University Archives); "Witness Against War' Correspondence," (Box 2, File 50, Richard Roberts Papers, United Church/Victoria University Archives); United Church Observer, 15 October 1939, p. 21; Norman, 241-45; and Socknat, pp. 200-11.
sub–executive was "feeble and cowardly", particularly because it had failed to affirm the right of "ministers to hold and express dissenting convictions". As a result, he was "rather grateful in some ways that my name is on the list". This gratitude was nevertheless tempered by repentance. As he wrote in the spring of 1940 to one of his daughters, the outbreak of war demonstrated "the actual and tragic failure of pacifism" and suggested that "the proper wear of pacifists at this time is sackcloth and ashes. Personally, I feel under conviction in the matter very keenly."\footnote{14}

Roberts's sense of the tragic failure of pacifism, however, did not prevent him from criticizing Reinhold Niebuhr for his attack on pacifists in his 1940 essay "Christian Moralism in America". Both because of what he said and because it was the formerly pacifist Niebuhr who had said it, Roberts wrote: "It hurts me, though, to see your flag at half–mast, when I remember how bravely it once bore 'the battle and the breeze'." He argued with Niebuhr on several points, including the relation of history to the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ and the process of redemption of which it is a part. The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ was also for Roberts central to understanding history and what might be possible within it. While Niebuhr argued that "the human situation remains the same in peace and in war, though it may be more clearly seen in war than in peace," Roberts maintained on the contrary:

\begin{quote}
War is an incident in the course of a world which God sent His Son to redeem. And why should any incident in history be allowed to impose a moratorium on the business of human redemption? Am I to soft-pedal the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ at every international crisis? The episode that we call the Incarnation should have a certain absolute significance for Christian believers — it is the only passage of history that has that character: and it is our one hope over against our desperate plight in this world.\footnote{15}
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\footnote{14} "'Witness Against War' Papers" (Box 3, File 64, Richard Roberts Papers, United Church/Victoria University Archives); and Norman, p. 245.  
Roberts's understanding of the relation of history and the incarnation was based on his conviction that the power of the spirit of God in Jesus Christ can and does operate to regenerate persons. By repentance, conversion, and transformation humans are recreated and sanctified for the redemption of all things that, by both the world striving for God and God reaching toward the world, comes with the establishment of God's righteousness.

From the summer of 1940 Richard Roberts lived in the United States, preaching, leading retreats, and addressing student conferences there and in Canada. In the fall of 1944 his health began to deteriorate due to arteriosclerosis and resulting strokes. He died in a nursing home in Brooklyn on April 10, 1945, less than a month before the end of the war in Europe. Of his last hours, his daughter Margaret reported: "All during the last night before he went into coma, he was moving his arms around in his old pulpit gestures and murmuring . . . 'I want to preach—I want to preach Jesus Christ'."

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16 Norman, pp. 251-58.