

**Peter Webster**

**George Bell, John Masefield and *The Coming of Christ*: context and significance**

[An article published in *Humanitas. The Journal of the George Bell Institute* 10:2 (2009). This version is the last version before typesetting (September 2008), and as such does not include points raised at proof stage.

More details on *Humanitas* may be found at <http://www.georgebellinstitute.org.uk/> ]

At Whitsuntide 1928, Canterbury cathedral saw four sell-out performances of a newly written Nativity Play by John Masefield, *The Coming of Christ*. With costumes designed by Charles Ricketts, and with music composed and directed by Gustav Holst, the national profile of the event was very high.<sup>1</sup> The commission also stands as Bell's first successful attempt to commission a new work of art for the church, and his own assessment of the event's significance was clear. Writing to inform the cast of the forced postponement of a repeat performance in 1929, Bell wrote:

But if we cannot meet this year we may rejoice that last year we were indeed creators. We have lighted a torch which nothing can extinguish and have given a witness to the fellowship of Religion and Poetry and Art, which will go on telling in ways far beyond our own imagination.

A great debt of gratitude was owed to all involved, not only by Bell himself 'but the Church, and everyone who cares for things lovely and noble and of good report'.<sup>2</sup> Preaching in 1953 at an anniversary

---

<sup>1</sup> A brief account is given in R.C.D. Jasper, *George Bell. Bishop of Chichester* (London, 1967) pp.41-44. For permission to make quotation from papers in their care, I am indebted to: the Cathedral and City Archivist of Canterbury; the Librarian of Lambeth Palace; and the Victoria and Albert Museum (Theatre Collections).

<sup>2</sup> Printed circular letter, dated 26 Mar. 1929, amongst the Bell Papers at Lambeth Palace Library (hereafter Bell Papers), vol. 154 ff.176-7. Documents from Lambeth Palace Library are cited by kind permission of the Librarian.

performance of the play at Wittersham in Kent, Bell's assessment of the event's importance was undiminished:

On that day, history was made. In a moving and enchanting form, the Poet and the Artist together re-entered the Church. They had only to be asked, and with a ready response to a lead which was not afraid to offer sympathetic direction, they brought their gifts. I think I may justly claim that it was the combination of a lead from the Church of Canterbury with the response of the Three Kings of their respective arts, Poetry, Music and Painting, which started a new chapter in the history of English drama.<sup>3</sup>

For Bell, this was due to the impact of the series of plays subsequently written for Canterbury festivals, and due also to the subsequent transfer of several of the Canterbury plays into the commercial theatre. Even allowing for Bell's habitually elevated rhetoric, his descriptions of *The Coming of Christ* are an indication of how the event had impressed itself upon him. The importance of the work at Canterbury is further underscored by a letter amongst Bell's papers, typed out but never sent, refusing the offer of the see of Chichester in 1929, in which the work of 'trying to re-associate religion and art, music and drama', only just begun in Canterbury, figures prominently among Bell's reasons for declining.<sup>4</sup>

This article will not attempt to assess the significance of the ensuing series of plays written for Canterbury, since they have been extensively treated by others;<sup>5</sup> neither will it take up the impact of those Canterbury plays in the commercial theatres nor Bell's

---

<sup>3</sup> Printed sermon given in association with a performance on December 13th 1953: Bell Papers vol. 157 ff.96-7.

<sup>4</sup> Bell to Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, 19 Mar. 1929, endorsed as cancelled, Bell Papers vol. 203 ff.23-4.

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth W. Pickering, Drama in the Cathedral. The Canterbury Festival Plays 1928-1948 (Worthing, 1985).

importance in the foundation of the Religious Drama Society.<sup>6</sup> It will confine itself to the immediate context and impact of *The Coming of Christ*, and will close with some observations on what it was Bell himself thought he was doing. It will suggest that whilst the commissioning of Masefield's play was not quite as ground-breaking as has been suggested, the play was nonetheless an audacious venture in a charged polemical climate. It will also try, through an examination of the reception of the play, to delineate some of the major fault lines in attitudes to religious drama in this period.

It is tempting, in the light of Bell's own view, and the remarkable flowering of religious drama that took place over the following three decades, to overstate the originality of staging a religious play in an English cathedral church. The event ought rather to be seen in the context of a decade or more of significant experimentation, mostly but not solely in London, and mostly amongst anglo-catholics. There are various contenders to be regarded as the first play in an English church in the twentieth century, but the earliest I have as yet found was a performance of *The Mystery of the Epiphany* by B.C. Boulter at the church of St Silas-the-Martyr, Kentish Town, in 1917.<sup>7</sup> Plays were regularly being performed at St Paul Covent Garden in the same period, under the leadership of H. L. Kingsford, and the critic of the *Sunday Express* thought that by 1928 plays of some sort had been produced in perhaps as many as 100 churches.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> On the Religious Drama Society, see Patrick French, *Younghusband. The last great Imperial adventurer* (London, 1994) pp.344-5; Kathleen Bainbridge-Bell and June Ottaway, *A brief historical sketch of the Religious Drama Society of Great Britain* (London, [1957?]) pp.6-7.

<sup>7</sup> K.M. Lobb, *The Drama in School and Church. A short survey* (London, 1955), p.114.

<sup>8</sup> 'Could the Church save the Stage?', *Sunday Express*, 3 June 1928. The plays at Covent Garden were known widely enough to have come to the attention of the drama critic of the *Liverpool Post*: 'The Theatre of To-day. Church and Stage.' *Liverpool Post* 1 June 1928.

Neither was it the case that these performances were semi-clandestine. James Adderley, vicar of St Anne's, Highgate, sponsored in 1925 a performance of a play that had already been refused a license by the Lord Chamberlain. The staging of *The Chastening* generated reports in the press, and correspondence between the Lord Chamberlain and Archbishop Randall Davidson (who had earlier advised against the license).<sup>9</sup> A nativity play, performed in the church of St Hilary in west Cornwall and written by its vicar Fr Bernard Walke, was in fact broadcast yearly from 1926 until 1934.<sup>10</sup> There were also various societies in existence who were concerned with promoting religious drama: the Morality Play Society was set up by Mabel Dearmer, wife of Percy Dearmer, before the First World War, and the Catholic Play Society was formed in 1917, numbering among its Vice-Presidents the actress Sybil Thorndike, and Athelstan Riley, one of the promoters of the *English Hymnal*, all under the direction of H. L. Kingsford.<sup>11</sup>

Quite how aware Bell was of all this activity is difficult to establish. Bell was in correspondence with Geoffrey Whitworth of the British Drama League as early as 1925 over possible plays for performance at Canterbury, and Bell had earlier supported Whitworth during the formation of the League, in 1919.<sup>12</sup> Before moving to Canterbury, it is also likely that as Randall Davidson's chaplain he would have been

---

<sup>9</sup> A Banned Play. To be given in St. Anne's church, Highgate' London Evening Standard, 8 June 1925. Davidson had advised the Lord Chamberlain against granting the play a license in June 1924: Lambeth Palace Library, Davidson Papers vol.205, ff.241-5.

<sup>10</sup> Asa Briggs, The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom vol. II: The Golden Age of Wireless (Oxford, 1995) p.229. Bernard Walke, Plays from St Hilary (London, 1939).

<sup>11</sup> Donald Gray, Percy Dearmer. A Parson's Pilgrimage (Norwich, 2000) pp.86-7; Kingsford to Bell, 15 Oct. 1927; Bell Papers vol. 153 ff.88-9 (headed paper gives information).

<sup>12</sup> The Canterbury correspondence begins at Bell Papers vol. 153 f.1 (Bell to Whitworth, 24 July 1925); correspondence regarding the British Drama League, 1918-19 at Bell Papers vol. 190 ff.303-12.

privity to the regular correspondence between archbishop and Lord Chamberlain over the by then very numerous plays on religious themes being considered for the commercial stage, and indeed some of these letters were included in Bell's later biography of Davidson.<sup>13</sup>

Despite these various antecedents, the staging of a play at Canterbury clearly represented a step change. Despite statements made in the press at the time and by commentators since, this was not the first such performance in a cathedral church.<sup>14</sup> The suffragan bishop of Middleton, R .G. Parsons, writing to congratulate Bell after having driven to Canterbury from Manchester to witness the play, gently pointed out the nativity plays in Manchester cathedral in each of the previous three years.<sup>15</sup> However, the public profile of Canterbury was of a quite different order, and the interest generated by the event was commensurately great. A scrapbook of press cuttings, preserved in the Victoria and Albert Museum, contains over 100 cuttings, including the national press, the church press, and syndications of the story in local papers from Aberdeen to Worcester.<sup>16</sup> As well as the national press, articles appeared in the United States and in Germany, and interested editors from the Netherlands and elsewhere enquired about sending a correspondent.<sup>17</sup> Amongst those attending the play was Frederick Dwelly, dean of Liverpool, and Ida David, wife of Dwelly's bishop Albert David, and Mrs David was to be amongst several later

---

<sup>13</sup> George Bell, Randall Davidson (London, OUP, 1935) pp.1213-15.

<sup>14</sup> Jasper, George Bell p.42; Laurence Irving, 'The Canterbury Adventure' Canterbury Papers X (1959) 1-14, at 2.

<sup>15</sup> Middleton to Bell 4 Aug 1928, Bell Papers 154 f.44.

<sup>16</sup> Victoria and Albert Museum Theatre Collections, Canterbury Cathedral Collection: THM/88 (The Coming of Christ), Box 1 of 2. (hereafter: V&A, THM/88)

<sup>17</sup> *Time*, 11 June 1928; *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 5 June 1928, front page; Fr. M. Hanepen (De Telegraaf, Amsterdam) to Bell, 22 May 1928, Bell Papers vol.153 f.257; Allen Raymond (New York Times) to Bell, 25 May 1928, Bell Papers vol. 153 f.275-6.

correspondents, apparently emboldened by Canterbury either to stage *The Coming of Christ* or another similar play.<sup>18</sup> Cyril Foster Garbett, then bishop of Southwark, sounded Bell out about bringing another Masefield play to Southwark cathedral for a 25th anniversary event.<sup>19</sup> Subsequent performances of *The Coming of Christ* took place at Lancing College in Sussex and at Salisbury St Edmund,<sup>20</sup> and enquiries concerning possible performances were received from the United States and from Canada.<sup>21</sup>

Amongst the extensive press coverage there was much positive reaction but, given the high profile of the play, it was perhaps inevitably criticised. The various grounds on which these attacks were made demonstrate the several points of contention over the nature and role of religious drama in this period. Some exception was taken to some of the lines voiced by Sandy and Earthy, two of the Shepherds. Masefield's shepherds had a good deal to say on contemporary economic inequality and the suffering of the common man in a war which could clearly be read as being the First World War.<sup>22</sup> The press coverage was dominated by this objection: that the shepherds, by convention 'good simple folk' in the Gospels and

---

<sup>18</sup> Correspondence between Ida David and Bell, May-June 1928, at Bell Papers vol. 153, f.269-70, 272-3; Bell Papers vol. 154 ff.2, 10-11.

<sup>19</sup> Letters between Bell and Garbett, May 1929, at Bell Papers vol. 154 ff.275, 279.

<sup>20</sup> On Lancing, see correspondence between Bell, the headmaster C.H. Blakiston, and Hewlett Johnson, Dean of Canterbury, at Bell Papers vol. 155: ff.53-56. On St Edmund Salisbury, see letters from the rector Rupert Shiner and his wife, Bell Papers vol. 154, ff.95-6 (December 28) and ff.157-8 (March 1929).

<sup>21</sup> Miss M. Adair (St John the Evangelist, Montreal) to Bell 10 Sept. 1928, Bell Papers vol. 154 f.47; Ernest Shayler (Bishop of Nebraska) to Bell, 20 June 1928, Bell Papers vol. 154 f.29.

<sup>22</sup> John Masefield, *The Coming of Christ* (London, Heinemann, 1928), in particular pp.29-30, 33. On the various editions of the play, see Philip W. Errington, *John Masefield. The "Great Auk" of English Literature. A Bibliography* (London, 2004) pp.321-5.

received tradition, were made the mouthpiece of ‘screeching discontented Communistic grumblings’.<sup>23</sup> One particular stanza concerning generals feasting whilst troops froze at the front prompted letters to Bell suggesting that this referred to an identifiable incident involving a now deceased officer.<sup>24</sup> However, despite the preponderance of this objection, the lines are relatively minor in the context of the whole play, and are clearly balanced by the subsequent words of Rocky, the senior shepherd, and need not detain us here.

There was also very considerable confusion as to the licensing powers of both local authorities and the Lord Chamberlain with regard to plays in churches in general, and the personation of Christ in particular; so much so that Masefield took legal advice on the matter.<sup>25</sup> This is an area that it is not possible to treat adequately here, and I hope to deal with it more fully elsewhere.

More fundamental were some of the criticisms made by Protestant groups, opposed to the very fact of dramatic performance in church buildings. Both Bell and Randall Davidson received a number of letters on the matter, and Davidson was petitioned by residents of the diocese in April 1928, well in advance of both performance and publication, urging him to intervene to prevent an ‘apparent act of sacrilege.’<sup>26</sup> One correspondent declared simply: ‘When I read of the profanation of Canterbury Cathedral I knelt & prayed that God would cleanse our Church.’<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> *The Patriot*, new series, vol. XIV, no. 331 (14 June 1928) pp.569-70.

<sup>24</sup> Col. W.B Wallace (Ickham Hall) to Bell, 26 May 1928, Bell Papers vol. 153 f.278.

<sup>25</sup> Masefield to Bell [undated, but probably October 1927], Bell Papers vol. 153 ff.82-6.

<sup>26</sup> Typescript petition, April 1928. Bell Papers vol. 153 f.229.

<sup>27</sup> Margaret Ward (Newcastle, Lit. Sec. of St Nicholas’ Cathedral Missionary Association) to Bell, 29 May 1928; V&A, THM/88, Box 1 of 2.

A Remonstrance of July 1928 from the National Church League could not easily be ignored, and was considered by the Chapter.<sup>28</sup> Far from being a fringe opinion, it was sent over the signature of E.A. Knox, retired bishop of Manchester and prominent leader of the evangelicals in the Church of England.<sup>29</sup> The Remonstrance laid out the protestant objections at length, and can be said to typify one side of a fundamental divide about the role of religious drama. Whilst voicing some objections to the specific content of Masefield's play, it argued that to stage a play at all was in any case to return to 'pagan methods of imparting religious teaching.' As well as having no warrant in the New Testament,

[plays] may have served some purpose in a world that knew nothing of the realities of sin and salvation. But we are convinced that they must be repugnant to souls that have sounded the deepest religious experience of conviction of sin and of conversion to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, who naturally look to men in your position for spiritual guidance.

This criticism was echoed in some of the press. The correspondent of the conservative periodical *The Patriot* argued that the medieval mystery plays had been attempts to represent the Gospel 'to men, women, and children who could neither read nor write, and who for the most part knew little or nothing of art.' Modern conditions were however, quite different:

To-day men and women can read all there is to be read, understand all there is to say, and see all that art has represented of human conceptions of these sacred matters.

---

<sup>28</sup> National Church League to the Dean & Chapter, 31 July 1928, Bell Papers vol.154 f.42-3. It was considered by the Chapter on August 4th, and a short acknowledgment sent: Canterbury Cathedral Archives, DCc/CA/18 (chapter act books, 1924-1931) f.442; Chapter Clerk to Bishop Knox, 8 Aug. 1928, Dcc-LB/62 (Letter Books, May 1928 - Jan 1929), f.422.

<sup>29</sup> The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography describes Knox as 'de facto leader of the evangelical party within the Anglican church.': Stephen Gregory, 'Knox, Edmund Arbuthnott (1847-1937)', Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, (London, 2004)

Anything in the way of Miracle plays, therefore, becomes superfluous, and however good may be its object, it can but engender criticism rather than worship.<sup>30</sup>

In this view, Christian truth was apprehended verbally and cerebrally, and a dramatic appeal to the mere emotions was at best ineffective and thus a wasteful distraction, and at worst a dangerous adulteration of the purity of the preached Word. Such criticism must also be seen against the background of the widespread fear of creeping catholicisation of the Church of England, which was particularly acute ahead of the second rejection of the revised Prayer Book by the House of Commons in June 1928, only weeks after the performances of the play. Bishop Knox and the National Church League had been prominent in campaigning against the revised book and, whilst it was not made explicit, the reference to 'pagan methods' may have had much of the disputed ritual of contemporary anglo-catholicism in mind, although it is hard to establish.<sup>31</sup>

The second point made by the National Church League was a broader one about the right relation between the church and popular culture, and one that perhaps persisted more widely in conservative thinking at this time than the more specifically theological objection already mentioned. The authors saw the age as one in which 'the pursuit of pleasure and love of vain display are blinding the eyes of men to the realities of sin and of judgment to come'. In the context of acute concern about the moral effects of both the theatre and the cinema,

---

<sup>30</sup> The Patriot, 14 June 1928.

<sup>31</sup> On the National Church League's campaign, see David Bebbington, Evangelicalism in Modern Britain (London, 1989) p.222; Kenneth Hylson-Smith, Evangelicals in the Church of England, 1734-1984 (Edinburgh, 1988) pp.236-39. The co-signatory of the Remonstrance, Guy Johnson, is acknowledged by Sir William Joynson-Hicks, The Prayer Book Crisis (London, 1928), p.v. On Knox's involvement, see E.A. Knox, Reminiscences of an Octogenarian, 1847-1934 (London, 1934) pp.321-33.

and the general effect of increasing popular leisure time, to convert the house of the Lord into a mere playhouse was to succumb to 'frivolous accommodation to that craze for amusement which is one of the most disquieting features of the present time.'<sup>32</sup>

Bell thus faced considerable opposition in principle to the staging of any play whatever. If that were not enough, he was also faced with objections from clerical colleagues, of views much closer to his own, about the orthodoxy of Masefield's play in particular. The specific objection related to the appearance of the Anima Christi, in an opening scene in which the soul of Christ discusses the impending Incarnation with Saints Peter and Paul and the Four Powers (The Power, The Sword, The Mercy and The Light).<sup>33</sup> Although the precise criticisms of the early drafts have not survived, the scene clearly caused considerable Christological difficulty for several, both within the Chapter and without. Bell, in a pattern which was to repeat itself with later commissions, found himself acting as broker between scrupulous colleagues and the artist, who was reluctant to begin altering parts of his work lest the whole fabric unravel, and on occasion seemed readier to abandon the whole play.<sup>34</sup> The dispute continued through October and November 1927, with a series of informal meetings amongst the clergy taking place, attended by Mervyn Haigh, chaplain to Davidson, who noted a pronounced critical temper amongst those present. As a compromise solution, the term

---

<sup>32</sup> The London Public Morality Council, chaired by the Bishop of London, had sent a memorial to the Lord Chamberlain concerning foul language on the London stage and music halls in October of the previous year: copy at Lambeth Palace Library, Davidson Papers vol.215 ff.284-5. See also G.I.T. Machin, 'British Churches and the Cinema in the 1930s' in Diana Wood (ed.), The Church and the Arts (Studies in Church History, XXVIII, Oxford, 1992) pp.477-88.

<sup>33</sup> Masefield, The Coming of Christ, pp.6-16.

<sup>34</sup> Masefield to Bell, 15 Nov. 1927, Bell Papers vol. 153, f.102; Masefield to Bell, received 18 Nov. 1927, Bell Papers, vol. 153, f.104.

Verbum was substituted for the purposes of programmes for the performances, but the term Anima was retained in the printed version.<sup>35</sup>

Despite this, the objections continued when the printed version appeared. The critic of *The Patriot* felt that the apparent request from the Anima Christi for an imputation of the strength from the Powers clearly unorthodox: 'This may be poetical and poets have great license, but it misrepresents Christian theology, and is, therefore, not conducive to Christian worship'.<sup>36</sup> Even well-disposed critics noted the scene's 'queer theology'.<sup>37</sup> One of the Canterbury clergy privately thought it bordering on the Gnostic, and, mindful of the polemical temperature within the wider church in relation to the Prayer Book, feared an adverse reaction in the church press or the Church Assembly; why, he suggested, should Benediction in a London church be deemed unlawful, but doubtful theology at Canterbury permissible, since neither was explicitly provided for, and both could be construed as illegal?<sup>38</sup>

The final ground on which *The Coming of Christ* was criticised was one which was to remain a central point of contention: the degree to which a piece of new art commissioned for the church needed necessarily to be in a style of its age, in order to communicate effectively with contemporary viewers. Bell in later years, and in particular when in contact with Hans Feibusch, would be found advocating just such a

---

<sup>35</sup> Haigh to Bell, 12 Nov. 1927, Bell Papers vol.153 f.101; Masefield to Bell, 24 Nov. 1927, Bell Papers vol. 153 f.107. The Chapter approved the text on December 5th: Canterbury Cathedral Archives, DCc/CA/18, f.372.

<sup>36</sup> *The Patriot*, p.569. The passage occurs at *The Coming of Christ*, p.12.

<sup>37</sup> Charles Davy, 'The Theatre. Mr. Masefield's "Mystery"', *Time and Tide*. 1 June 1928, p.540.

<sup>38</sup> Ernest Evans (sub-warden, St Augustine's College, Canterbury) to Bell 25 May 1928, Bell Papers vol. 153 f.274.

position: as he argued in an article from 1955, religious art 'is not a thing which can be isolated from the general artistic movement of an age. Confine it and it becomes corrupted, its expression a dead letter.'<sup>39</sup> However, in this case even Masefield's advocates have not argued that *The Coming of Christ* was a play which drew on the most contemporary of poetic and dramatic techniques. This conventionality in both technique and imagery were picked up by critics at the time. One letter to Bell suggested that Masefield's figure of Christ was reminiscent of Holman Hunt; a weak and effeminate idea that had been too prevalent in Christian art, and which could not hope to engage the 'discontented & restless minds' of the present generation.<sup>40</sup> Several critics, whilst welcoming the experiment, also thought that the mixture of archaic and contemporary speech in the play indicative of 'a lack of clear-cut intention'; such a play needed to be either entirely archaic or thoroughly modern, but not a jarring composite of the two.<sup>41</sup> T.S. Eliot made a similar point, in characteristically withering style: having read (but not witnessed) the play, he questioned 'whether such an entertainment serves any cause of religion or art. The poetry is pedestrian, machine made Shakespearian iambics; the imagery is full of Birmingham spirits and Sheffield shepherds. The theological orthodoxy is more than doubtful? the literary incompetence is more than certain.' For Eliot, Masefield had neither a straightforwardly Christian imagination, nor sufficient competence as a theologian, nor indeed mastery as a poet; the play was 'therefore representative neither of mediaeval feeling, nor of modern feeling.' Whilst the intention of the play was doubtless good, '[w]e venture to counsel our spiritual pastors, that they should see to it either that they employ

---

<sup>39</sup> 'The Church and the Artist', *The Listener* 13 Jan. 1955 pp. 65-66, at 65.

<sup>40</sup> Miss Johnson-Smyth to Bell, 29 May 1928, Bell Papers vol. 153 f.283.

<sup>41</sup> Davy, 'Mr Masefield's "Mystery"'.

artists who are definite in their theology, or else who are really good artists.<sup>42</sup>

So it was that the production of Masefield's play brought to the surface many issues about the legitimate role of religious drama, many of which were not to be settled for decades to follow. Plays in churches were seen by some as in principle illegitimate as a means of religious instruction, or a dangerous flirtation with the desire of fallen man for carnal stimulation. If plays were permissible, then the precise degree of imaginative freedom that could be afforded to the artist became a particular issue, especially when the artist's conception appeared to border on the heterodox. Finally, the question of the place of contemporary style was one that remained unsettled for decades, across the art-forms.<sup>43</sup>

\*\*\*\*\*

In closing, I should like to consider how it was that Bell himself justified the commissioning of Masefield's play, and the purposes that this revival of religious drama, and indeed of all the arts, was to serve. In fact, Bell wrote little in the way of extensive commentary at the time; it was only in the 1940s and after that his writing on the subject

---

<sup>42</sup> The Criterion. A Literary Review, VII, No. 4 (June 1928), editorial, p.5.

<sup>43</sup> See also Peter Webster, 'The "revival" in the visual arts in the Church of England, c.1935-c.1956', in Kate Cooper and Jeremy Gregory (eds), Revival and Resurgence in Christian History (Studies in Church History XXXIV, Woodbridge, 2008), pp.297-306; Ian Jones and Peter Webster, 'Anglican "Establishment" reactions to "pop" church music, 1956-c.1990' in Kate Cooper and Jeremy Gregory, eds., Elite and Popular Religion, Studies in Church History XXXII (Woodbridge, 2006), 429-41; Peter Webster, 'Beauty, utility and "Christian civilisation": war memorials and the Church of England, 1940-47' Forum for Modern Language Studies, XXXIV, no.2 (2008), 199-211.

reached its peak of both volume and range.<sup>44</sup> At this early stage, the purposes of such a re-connection of church and drama were two-fold, and both purposes were pitched in a relatively safe key. At one level, a reconnection of art and church was simply a happy recovery of a former state of affairs, which had been lost. Bell had been extremely concerned that as many as possible of the cast and musicians should be Canterbury people; impressed perhaps by the continuity of players in the Oberammergau play, which enjoyed something of a vogue at this point, his was in part an organic vision of local endeavour concentrated around the church as heart of the community: as he expressed it in his initial call for players: 'I am anxious that all who take part in the play should look upon it as a religious offering, the kind of offering men used to make of their arts, their crafts and their gifts, in earlier days, and may make still.'<sup>45</sup> Behind this vision was a particular reading of church history, prevalent in much commentary about all the arts at this time, that saw a medieval unity of art and religion, sundered variously by the Reformation, Puritanism and industrialisation.<sup>46</sup> As Bell expressed it some years later; 'In the Middle Ages our architects, our sculptors in wood, metal and stone, our painters, our poets, together with the teacher and the priest, were the interpreters and proclaimers of the Christian faith, which was the basis of our culture. There is no basic faith to the culture of today.'<sup>47</sup>

Growing out of this was a supplementary hope; that this re-association might serve a missionary purpose, in re-engaging the

---

<sup>44</sup> 'The church and the artist' The Studio CXXIV, no. 594 (Sept 1942), 81-92; 'The Church as Patron of Art' The Listener, 14 Sept. 1944 p.298; 'The Church and the Artist', The Listener, 13 Jan. 1955, 65-66;

<sup>45</sup> Bell Papers, vol.153: f.148.

<sup>46</sup> See, *inter alia*, Edward Sackville-West, 'Art and the Christian Church', Vogue (March 1947) pp.64-5, 114, 120.

<sup>47</sup> Sermon before 1953 performance at Wittersham, Bell Papers vol. 157, ff.96-7.

minds of those with whom the Church had lost contact; to rebuild that 'basic faith' to British culture. A manifesto document for the Religious Drama Society, dating from 1933 while Bell was President, expressed the connection thus: drama, as a popular medium, was that to which people were turning to express religious truth, and 'Religious Drama will attract crowds to witness it - it will fill our largest Churches, and pierce the indifference of our most disillusioned spectators.' If dramatic skill and religious intelligence could be brought together in the right combination 'there issues a very real revelation, through art, of Divine Truth and Beauty.'<sup>48</sup>

That Bell's hopes of missionary impact were not falling entirely on deaf ears amongst critics was apparent in some reactions to the play. For the critic of *The Spectator*, the play showed clearly 'how little joy his almost immeasurable gains and discoveries have brought to the God-hungry man of the first half of the twentieth century.'<sup>49</sup> Yet the play offered hope. A tour of all the cathedrals was mooted by one critic, by means of which 'a most ennobling effect might be created among our spiritually parched and weary people'.<sup>50</sup> Even more grandly, the critic of the *Sunday Express* wondered whether a movement of native English religious plays, 'from the very soil itself' might save the theatre from the cowardice of the theatre managers; even to the worldly, they would be of 'deep and profound interest [...] an antidote to the shallowness of our dance-club dreariness, our cocktail boredom and our shingled shame.'<sup>51</sup>

What was less prominent at this stage was the acute sense of societal crisis, both nationally and internationally, through which much of

---

<sup>48</sup> Bell Papers, vol.155, ff.355-6

<sup>49</sup> C. Townsend, 'The Masefield Mystery Play' *The Spectator*, 2 June 1928

<sup>50</sup> Thomas Moulton, 'A Theatre of the Future. Canterbury Cathedral gives house-room to John Masefield's new play', *Co-operative News* 9 June 1928

<sup>51</sup> *Sunday Express*, 3 June 1928.

Bell's writing on the arts in the 1940s and 1950s was refracted. This change in key may be detected in the sermon on the play at Wittersham in 1953, discussed above.<sup>52</sup> The same historical narrative of a medieval unity of art and religion was there, as was the emphasis on drama as a missionary tool. However, the sense of urgency is much greater than in the comparative tranquillity of 1928. 'On every hand today', Bell declared, 'we are saturated with material things.' The newspapers, cinema, and all the agencies of entertainment assailed the mind and eye with material things, which were, he admitted, necessary up to a point. 'But by a "saturation with material things" I mean such an overpowering emphasis on the grosser or coarser side of experience; with the accent heavily laid on pleasure, or power, or drink, or food, or clothes, or money, or passion, or cruelty, or lust, or wealth, or crime.' This saturation could only be alleviated and counteracted by a 'new direction in spiritual things - with an insistence on the Transcendent. Religion above all, but Religion enriched with Poetry and Art !'

Bell also saw hope in an international political situation in which 'fear and distrust, suspicion and hatred are abroad. [...] We need a new approach altogether to the soul and mind of man, and to the comity of nations. We need the triumph of faith over fear, of love over hatred. We need the "Coming of Christ".' For Bell, all the arts had their role to play in this revival of the Christian basis of civilisation: 'We need to have the meaning of that 'Coming' brought home to the present generation of all races in a way that will be relevant to their necessities, with the help of the imagination of the Artist, and the invention of the Scientist.' In making the audacious commission of *The Coming of Christ*, and in facing down the opposition to it, George Bell may justly be said to have taken a most significant step in that direction.

---

<sup>52</sup> Sermon before 1953 performance at Wittersham, Bell Papers vol. 157, ff.96-7.