

Archibald Baxter's Christian Faith and Conscientious Objection

David Tombs

University of Otago

david.tombs@otago.ac.nz

'Rethinking Pacifism for Revolution, Security and Politics'

National Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Otago, New Zealand,

23 November 2017

Introduction

Archibald Baxter is New Zealand's most famous war resister. His story is well known for a number of reasons, not least because of the mistreatment he experienced during the war of 1914–1918.¹ Baxter has become the most prominent of 14 conscientious objectors sent from New Zealand to England in 1917, and subsequently to the Front, where he and three others were subjected to 'Field Punishment No. 1'.² Baxter told the story in his own autobiographic account, *We Will Not Cease*, which was first published in 1939.³ In more recent times, it has been retold in a variety of places and in different media, including the paintings of Bob Kerr,⁴ and a powerful television film, *Field Punishment No 1*.⁵ Moreover, as the father of New Zealand's most celebrated poet James K. Baxter, who also wrote about him, Archibald has attracted further interest and a high profile.

[SLIDE Archibald Memorial Trust] I became aware of Baxter and his story when I moved to Otago in 2015 and was invited to give the 2015 Archibald Baxter Annual Peace lecture. I was particularly interested in his experience of No 1 Field Punishment, which was commonly referred to as 'crucifixion'. A conference organised by Geoffrey Troughton at Victoria University of Wellington allowed me to take this interest in Baxter further, in a paper on crucifixions during the First World War. After that Geoff, supported by my colleague here at Otago, John Stenhouse, suggested that I might investigate Baxter's own religious beliefs in

¹ For a concise biography see David Grant, 'Baxter, Archibald McColl Learmond,' <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/3b19/baxter-archibald-mccoll-learmond>.

² Field Punishment No 1 was commonly referred to as 'crucifixion', and 60, 000 British soldiers were subjected to it during the war; Richard Holmes, *Tommy: The British Soldier on the Western Front*, Harper Collins, 2004, p. 558. An article by Robert Blatchford, a former army sergeant turned journalist, entitled 'Why "Crucify" Tommy?', which described the punishment in graphic detail, in *Illustrated Sunday Herald*, 29 October 1916; see Clive Emsley, 'Why Crucify Tommy?' *History Today* (November 2012): 27–33.

³ Archibald Baxter, *We Will Not Cease* (Auckland: Cape Catley, 2012), 19. Unless indicated otherwise, all page references hereafter are to the 2012 edition, which includes a Foreword by Michael King, first published in 2003.

⁴ See David Grant, *Field Punishment No. 1: Archibald Baxter, Mark Briggs and New Zealand's Anti-militarist Tradition*, with paintings by Bob Kerr (Wellington: Steele Roberts, 2008), especially 41–64.

⁵ *Field Punishment No. 1*, directed by Peter Burger (Lippy Pictures, 2014).

more detail, and I am grateful to them both for this encouragement and the help they both gave me in following it through.

'Under the Surface'

[SLIDE – Contrasting Views] Religious conviction has been previously recognized as a factor in Baxter's opposition to war. For example, David Grant identified Baxter as a Christian socialist who 'made the decision to resist on his own, for reasons both socialist and religious';⁶ the Ministry of Culture and Heritage also lists Baxter and his five brothers among those who objected to war on religious grounds.⁷ Yet, as his wife Millicent noted in 1978, the depth and centrality of Baxter's religious commitment has not been well understood—in large part because he was reluctant to share his beliefs, even with her.⁸ This has led to very different interpretations of Baxter's relationship to religion.

Frank McKay states: 'His belief was not based on religious grounds, since he belonged to no organised religion, but on his own understanding of Christ's command, 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself'.⁹ He adds: 'Archie was a humanist, though he believed in God and prayed to Him'.¹⁰

Penny Griffith has recently suggested Baxter was a 'Quaker at heart' even though he never joined the Religious Society of Friends.¹¹ Griffith cites Paul Ostreicher, the famous Quaker pacifist, who knew Baxter some years later and described him as 'a humanist who had no specific belief in God'. Ostreicher suggests that Baxter was sympathetic to the Quakers but had too much integrity to join a religious society when he did not feel religious'.¹²

[SLIDE – Saints and Stirrers] There is no question that Baxter's religiosity and personal beliefs in the years 1917–18 are hard to untangle. The chapter I eventually wrote for Geoff has recently been published in his collection *Saints and Stirrers* (2017).¹³ In it, I try to shed light on what can be known about this period of his life, and how his religious convictions relate to his opposition to service in the First World War.

⁶ Grant, 'Baxter,' 40; Grant, *Field Punishment*, 38.

⁷ 'Imprisoned Conscientious Objectors, 1916–1920,' <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/war/the-military-objectors-list>.

⁸ Michael King, *Interview with Millicent Baxter*, transcribed by Christine Catley (October 1978), 15, 31. MS-3099/014, Hocken Library, Dunedin.

⁹ Frank McKay, *The Life of James K. Baxter* (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1990), 7.

¹⁰ McKay, 11.

¹¹ Penny Griffith, *Out of the Shadows: The Life of Millicent Baxter* (Wellington: Pen Publishing, 2015), 81.

¹² Cited in Griffith, 81.

¹³ David Tombs, 'Under the Surface: Archibald Baxter's Religious Faith' in Geoff Troughton (ed.), *Saints and Stirrers: The Peace Tradition in New Zealand*. Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2017, pp. 122–43.

Drawing primarily upon Baxter's own writings the chapter suggests Baxter's Christian faith was neither conventional nor transparent. He eschewed church membership until later in life, and was highly reticent about his own beliefs when writing for the public. It is little wonder that the authorities were repeatedly confused by Baxter's religious convictions, identifying him at different times in prison as agnostic and then Catholic, and listing him as Plymouth Brethren on his military record. The 1918 military medical record that identified him more generically as 'a believer' seems to have finally got it right, and may be a quote from his own words. This does not preclude the possibility that the Baxter family had earlier been involved with Plymouth Brethren, and Archibald may have been baptized as an infant, but he was not a member as an adult.

We Will Not Cease refers to religion in a number of passages but offers little explicit discussion on his own faith, or its importance to his pacifism. In some places the book seems to downplay or omit references to religion which are clearer in his other writing; when religion is mentioned, Baxter is usually more explicit on what he was not than what he was, and in many places his writing is open to different interpretations. He never unambiguously offered his religious beliefs as the basis for his objection to war. It is therefore understandable that some have suggested that Baxter did not have a personal faith or believe in God. However, despite the inevitable challenges his writing creates for understanding his beliefs, there is sufficient evidence to conclude that his belief in God and Christian faith was a significant factor in his moral outlook and opposition to war.

I suggest that four key pieces of evidence support this interpretation.

[SLIDE – Letter to parents] First, his own words in a letter to his parents in 1918, which record his belief in prayer and a fairly conventional Christian expectation of an after-life. In this he promised that his family's prayers for him were not in vain, and that 'I will pray for you all to the last'.¹⁴ Towards the end he wrote: 'I know that we will meet again. Oh what a bright morning that will be whether in this world or the next'.¹⁵

[SLIDE – *Armaeddon or Calvary* image] Likewise, his testimony in Holland's collection, *Armageddon or Calvary* (1919) opens with a statement on the underlying principles of his pacifism. In this he first explains that his intention is not to publicly 'parade my opinions

¹⁴ Archibald Baxter Letter to Parents, 5 March 1918, J. T. Paul Papers, MS-0982/752, reprinted in Gavin McLean and Ian McGibbon, ed., *The Penguin Book of New Zealanders at War* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 2009), 90–91.

¹⁵ McLean and McGibbon, 91.

or principles', but simply to 'make a plain statement of facts'.¹⁶ He then addresses his objections to war:

I am against war on this ground, and I wonder that any sane person who knows the destruction, the degradation, the misery, and the sorrow caused by war, can regard it as anything else than diabolical in the extreme.¹⁷

[SLIDE – *Armaeddon or Calvary* quote] This passage does not draw attention to the religious foundation to his pacifism but it does not exclude it. A more explicitly religious concern is evident in subsequent comments:

I believe that a man should seek to bring his life and actions into agreement with his truest sense of duty towards God and Man. I believe that the Soul of Man is not, and cannot be, subject to any earthly State, for no earthly State is perfect.¹⁸

[SLIDE *We Will Not Cease* image] Third, his own description in *We Will Not Cease* of his suffering during Field Punishment No. 1 and the strength he says he derived from God at this time. Baxter describes how, early in his punishment, he started to feel overwhelmed by the pain he would have to endure.¹⁹

[SLIDE – *We Will Not Cease* quote on Field Punishment]

I began to think of the length of my sentence and it rose up like a mountain. The pain grew steadily worse until after half an hour it seemed absolutely unendurable. Between my set teeth I said, 'Oh God, this is too much. I can't bear it.' ... At the very worst, strength came to me and I knew I would not surrender. The battle was won and though the suffering increased rather than decreased as the days wore on, I never had to fight it again.²⁰

At this low point, Baxter says he called out to God and soon afterwards found a new strength. This passage is the clearest evidence of his own faith in the book, and it shows that his faith was a critical element in sustaining him in the face of suffering.

Finally, the words of his wife Millicent in an 1978 interview with Michael King, which describe him as much misunderstood but 'essentially Christian' with a faith that was always 'under the surface'. Echoing Archie's own words already cited that he did not wish to 'parade

¹⁶ H. E. Holland, *Armageddon or Calvary: The Conscientious Objectors of New Zealand and 'The Process of Their Conversion'* (Wellington: Maoriland Worker, 1919), 75.

¹⁷ Holland, 75–76.

¹⁸ Holland, 76.

¹⁹ Field punishment took the form of a prolonged stress position that grew increasingly painful and damaging as the hours passed. On Field Punishment as a form of torture, see David Tombs, 'The Politics of Torture: The Findings of the US Senate Intelligence Committee Report on Torture,' Archibald Baxter Memorial Trust, Annual Peace Lecture, 2015, University of Otago, 21 September 2015, <http://www.archibaldbaxtertrust.com/2015-prof-david-tombs/>.

²⁰ Baxter, 123.

my opinions or principles'. This interview was conducted as part of King's research on James K. Baxter.

[SLIDE – King interview quote 1] In one particularly revealing question, King asked: 'Would you say that your home life at the time that Jim was a boy, was of a distinctively Christian kind – were you ...?' To this, Millicent answered: 'Well, it wasn't ... I think it was really fundamentally Christian but though the boys said their prayers at night and that sort of thing, we didn't call it Christian. It was really fundamentally Christian, I mean, my husband was'²¹ Millicent starts by answering that the family wasn't distinctively Christian, but then says the family was 'really fundamentally Christian', and this is sufficiently important for her to repeat almost immediately. Furthermore, she also provides evidence that although the family did not call itself Christian, James and Terence still 'said their prayers at night and that sort of thing'.²² It appears that although the family were fundamentally Christian in their practices, they did not think of this as particularly distinctive in the culture of the day, and did not call themselves a Christian family.

[SLIDE – King interview quote 2] Millicent also told King that many years later, she managed to get Archie's medical file from 1918. She comments on a phrase in the record which states that Baxter 'was very fond of religion', which she rightly says 'is a funny way to put it'.²³ Millicent notes: 'He said he was a believer. Well I think that it shows that it's sort of under the surface all the time, all through that book'.²⁴ In Millicent's view, this reserve meant that most people did not see the Christian dimension of *We Will Not Cease*:

I mean he wasn't explicit about it and that was the peculiar thing about his spiritual side, that even I who knew him best of any ... better than anyone else could, I didn't get into that at all hardly. He was so reserved on it.²⁵

Millicent returns to this later in the interview:

Well it's difficult to know because I didn't really know what his spiritual feelings were – spiritually he was terribly reticent ... he could rise to heights I couldn't, and in some ways he was a mystic.²⁶

²¹ King, *Interview*, 15 (original ellipsis). Later in the interview, Millicent adds: '... he was extremely ... he was devoutly religious – he really was', although she might be speaking here of Archibald's later years; see *Interview*, 30.

²² King, *Interview*, 15.

²³ King, *Interview*, 16.

²⁴ King, *Interview*, 16.

²⁵ King, *Interview*, 16.

²⁶ King, *Interview*, 31.

In light of this evidence, one of the puzzling features is why this evidence has not had more influence on those who have suggested that Baxter was not religious. Admittedly the interview with Millicent may not be well known, but Baxter's own writings are readily available. The tendency to minimise or ignore completely what he says about the role of Christian belief in his life is remarkable.

One reason I suspect, though it is hard to demonstrate, is that many of the commentators have little interest in religion or expertise for unpicking the complexity of Baxter's religiosity. His insistence that he was not a member of a church is taken as all that needs to be said on the matter. It is also quite possible that the desire to make *We Will Not Cease* appeal to as wide a constituency as possible may also have encouraged Archie and/or Millicent to downplay the religious elements in his thinking.

Above all, however, it is likely that Baxter's own extraordinary reticence about his faith, attested in his own account and in Millicent's, that has to be acknowledged. He deliberately and consistently refuses to share details on his religious outlook. However, a central argument in the chapter, is that Baxter's reserve about his faith should not be interpreted as evidence that it was of little importance to him. Rather, he saw faith as a matter which one kept largely to oneself. His sense of integrity and personal privacy prevented a more public statement of his convictions, and he was determined to avoid 'parading' his beliefs. If this is correct, it might be said that he was reticent precisely because he took his faith so seriously.

[Slide – Penny Griffith *Out of the Shadows* image]

Against this background, in this paper I will address the events much later in his life when he made an explicit commitment to institutional religion in his conversion to Catholicism in 1965. An account of which is offered by Penny Griffith, in her book on Millicent Baxter.²⁷ I will offer a brief overview of their decision to convert and comment on three further aspects, two very minor and one more significant, that have a bearing on the arguments offered in the chapter.

Baxter's Conversion to Catholicism

In late 1964 or early 1965 Archie was admitted to the Mater Hospital, Royal Terrace in Dunedin for a minor eye operation.²⁸ He had asked to meet the chaplain, Father Sellar, and

²⁷ Griffith, pp. 180-83.

²⁸ Mater Misericordian hospital had opened in a converted house at 19 Royal Terrace, Dunedin in 1936. In 1969 it moved into a purpose-built location at the new location 72 Newington Avenue, Maori Hill, Dunedin, and in 1989 it changes its name to Mercy hospital.

they quickly developed a cordial social relationship. After Archie was discharged, Father Sellar took weekly drives out to visit Archie and Millicent in Brighton. The relationship between the three of them deepened and Archie told Sellar he wished to explore Catholicism. Archie appears to have believed that Millicent would be less enthusiastic about this, but it turned out that she was thinking along similar lines.

From them on, Sellar continued to meet them both each week and provided them with preparation for baptism and reception into the church. They were strongly supported in this by their son James, who had become Catholic in 1958.

After a few months, Archibald and Millicent felt ready to be baptized, but according to Griffith a final obstacle now presented itself: ‘Could they remain pacifists and at the same time become Catholics?’²⁹

Griffiths indicates that they found their answer in Pope John XXIII’s Encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth). The Encyclical had been published on 11 April 1963 and was titled Establishing University Peace in Truth, Justice, Charity and Liberty.

Presumably the paragraphs addressed to the ‘Signs of the Times’ (126-129) were particularly important. These state:

126. Men nowadays are becoming more and more convinced that any disputes which may arise between nations must be resolved by negotiation and agreement, and not by recourse to arms.

127. We acknowledge that this conviction owes its origin chiefly to the terrifying destructive force of modern weapons. It arises from fear of the ghastly and catastrophic consequences of their use. Thus, in this age which boasts of its atomic power, it no longer makes sense to maintain that war is a fit instrument with which to repair the violation of justice.

Likewise, a little later, within the section headed Prince of Peace (166-72), which is itself a reference to Isaiah 9.6, paragraph 170 identifies Christ as the guarantor of Peace:³⁰

170. It is Christ, therefore, who brought us peace; Christ who bequeathed it to us: "Peace I leave with you: my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, do I give unto you." (Jn 14.27).

Reassured by such strong Papal teaching on peace, Archie and Millicent were received into the Church on 3 July 1965. The service was at Peter Chanel Church on 3 July 1965. Archie

²⁹ Griffith p. 182.

³⁰ ‘For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.’ Is. 9.6.

took the baptismal name of Francis (after Francis of Assisi) and Millicent took the name of John (after John XXIII, who had died 3 June 1963). They remained faithful and committed member until Archibald passed away on 10 August 1970 and Millicent on 3 July 1984.

Looking at this chapter in their life, I am struck by three elements which have a bearing on the wider argument made in my chapter. The first two of these are quite minor but still worth noting.

First, as noted in the chapter, in the interview with King, Millicent refers to Archie as something of a mystic, and I suggest this might help to explain the difficulty which others had in categorising his beliefs. Father Sellar provides additional support for understanding Archie in this way:

To me he was a genuine mystic because he had this effortless sense of oneness with nature, with other people, with his God, and within himself, with all converging effortlessly into one.³¹

According to Griffith, Sellar revised this description slightly a week later. He wrote:

On reflection, I think that Archie could be better described as a contemplative rather than a mystic because mysticism can give the impression of someone who lives in a different world of esoteric thought, sometimes quite disconnected from reality'.³²

Although Stellar only knew Archie when he was in his advanced years, his comments reinforce and echo Millicent's observation. If a mystical or contemplative streak was also part of his character as a young man, it would help to account for the difficulty that the authorities had in understanding Archie's religious outlook when he was younger.

Second, there is very little written material by Archie after his reception into the church which might be used to compare his imagery and terminology between this period and when he was a young man. One exception is a piece he wrote in 1968 to protest against the Vietnam War. In the last line, he makes reference to the Devil's philosophy:

...the only apparent justification that war ever had was that by destroying some lives it might clumsily preserve others. But now even that justification is being stripped away. We make war chiefly on civilians and respect for human life seems to have become a thing of the past. To accept this situation would be to accept the Devil's philosophy.

³¹ Sellar; cited Griffith, p. 180.

³² Griffith, p. 180.

Admittedly it is hard to know how much weight to put on this reference. Does it suggest a significant religious outlook, or is it simply a colloquial expression? However, the fact that it is very similar to terminology and images used in his much earlier writing cited above is interesting. There too he included religious language and symbolism without writing upon it in any sustained way. Whatever might be made of them, the fact that they feature in both his younger years (when not affiliated to a church) and after his conversion to Catholicism, suggests that his underlying religious outlook might not be so very different.

Thirdly, and I think most significantly, one of the most surprising feature of their conversion is that they may have kept it relatively quiet, and perhaps even secret, in the Baxter family. It is clear that their son James was well aware of their plans and strongly supportive. Griffith notes that James wrote to Millicent everyday to encourage her.³³ Yet Archie's niece Diane Dore (daughter of his brother Donald) insists that despite the close relationship between Archie and Donald, her father had no idea of Archibald's conversion until his funeral.

[Slide – Penny Griffith *Out of the Shadows* quote]

Griffith comments:

It seems for some people there are certain subjects, like religion that are so personal they they do no share their thoughts even, or perhaps particularly, with those who are closest to them.³⁴

I suggest that this supports my argument that his reticence about religion in his earlier life should not be taken as an indication that religion was not important to him. His decision to convert to Catholicism was a very serious decision for him. If his niece is correct that it was kept private even from close family member outside the couple and their own children, it strongly supports the possibility that he would have been similarly reticent in his younger years.

Conclusion

The primary purpose of this chapter has been to add a brief additional discussion on Archibald Baxter's conversion to Catholicism to the chapter I have recently written on his religious beliefs as a young man. Most of what I have presented is already in the public domain through the work of Penny Griffith, and I cannot claim much credit for what I have offered above. Nonetheless, there are three aspects which I have noted that might provide further

³³ It appears Millicent had more reservations than Archie with regard to the religious beliefs; Griffith, pp. 181-82.

³⁴ Griffith, p. 181.

support for the argument offered in the chapter. First, Father Stellar supports Millicent in suggesting that Archibald had a mystical or contemplative streak. Second, the explicitly religious language and imagery to be seen in Archibald's writing after his conversion, when there can be no doubt about him actively identifying as Christian, is not so very different from his writing when he was younger, even though many commentators have suggested that at that time he was not religious. Third, the claims of his niece that his brother Donald did not know about his conversion until Archibald's funeral might further confirm the point made about his remarkable reticence.

Archibald Baxter's Christian Faith and Conscientious Objection Summary

What is widely agreed ...

- Baxter was not a member of a church during the time period covered in *We Will Not Cease*. This remained true until much later in life, when he became Catholic in 1965.
- He did not see his Pacifism as dependent on his Christian beliefs, he saw killing people in a war as wrong, and he saw this as a sufficient reason for his stand.

What also needs to be recognised ...

- He had Christian beliefs, used Christian language and images, and prayed, but he was extremely reticent about his faith. It is therefore hard to be certain exactly what he thought and different interpretations of the evidence are often possible. He was much clearer on what he was rather than what he was not.
- The authorities had trouble understanding him and categorised him in different ways at different points: Plymouth Brethren, Catholic, Agnostic, and 'believer'.
- He saw his Christian beliefs and values as entirely consistent with his Pacifism, and as further support for his Pacifism.
- At one of the most challenging moments in his life, during Field Punishment, it seems that he found comfort and strength in God, and this was a turning point in enduring the punishment.

Conclusions

- Baxter is best understood as a non-denominational (broadly Protestant) Christian believer, who 'believed but did not belong' (until his conversion to Catholicism), and may have had a mystical inclination.
- He deliberately kept his religious beliefs to himself, saying little to his wife or brothers, but this was because his faith was important to him not because it was irrelevant (and he was a Kiwi farmer)
- He was more explicit in his more personal and private correspondence (letter to parents) and more reticent in public writing (*We Will Not Cease*). This suggests that any peer pressure to present an alternative public image to what he really believed worked to downplay religion rather than vice-versa.