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Was John Bright a Pacifist? Quakerism, Morality and the Politics of Peace in Victorian Britain[*]

The question of whether John Bright (1811–89), leading figure of Victorian political dissent and liberalism, long-term parliamentarian, and thrice a cabinet minister under Gladstone, was a pacifist—that is, an individual who rejected all war and subscribed to the absolutist doctrine of non-resistance upheld by his denomination, the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)—has been engaging historians and his biographers for more than a century. Bright, according to the majority of these scholars, was never a pacifist either in his public or private life, despite his impassioned denunciations of war both inside and outside parliament. Relying on only some of his well-known pronouncements on the subject, Bright's early biographers resolutely asserted that he did not condemn war on the pacifist principles of Quakers and the Peace Society, but rather on grounds accepted by all individuals involved in political and public debate. Bright did not take the 'high "Quaker" ground, condemning all war', averred G.M. Trevelyan, and during the Crimean War (1854–6) 'he met the wise men of the Foreign Office and of the Treasury Bench on their own ground, and routed them on their own dispatches as reported in their own Blue Books'.[1] Besides, added Trevelyan, Bright would later go on to support the restoration of order following the Indian uprising of 1857 and the suppression of the Confederate cause in the American Civil War.[2] The case thus seemed closed.

Later biographers have similarly shown too much confidence in distancing Bright from pacifism.[3] Most historians have followed suit.[4] Yet the

* I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments and constructive feedback. I am also grateful to Jan Rüger and the *EHR* assistant editors for all their help and guidance.

1. G.M. Trevelyan, *The Life of John Bright* (London, 1913), p. 218. See also R.B. O'Brien, *John Bright: A Monograph* (Boston, MA, 1911), pp. 93, 221.
2. Trevelyan, *Life of John Bright*, p. 218.
3. See, for example, H. Ausubel, *John Bright: Victorian Reformer* (New York, 1966), pp. vii, 58, 240–41; B. Cash, *John Bright: Statesman, Orator, Agitator* (London, 2012), p. 207; and K. Robbins, *John Bright* (London, 1979), p. 104; cf. K. Robbins, *Politicians, Diplomacy and War in Modern British History* (London, 1996), p. 32.
4. J.T. Mills, *John Bright and the Quakers* (2 vols, London, 1935), ii, p. 211; G.B. Henderson, 'The Pacifists of the Fifties', *Journal of Modern History*, ix (1937), pp. 314–41, at 317, 321; A.J.P. Taylor, 'John Bright and the Crimean War', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, xxxvi (1954), pp. 501–22, at 506; A. Briggs, *Victorian People: A Reassessment of Persons and Themes, 1851–67* (London, 1955), p. 213; A.J.P. Taylor, *The Trouble Makers: Dissent over Foreign Policy, 1792–1939* (London, 1957), pp. 61–2; D. Reed, *Cobden and Bright: A Victorian Political Partnership* (London, 1967), p. 117; J.L. Sturgis, *John Bright and the Empire* (London, 1969), pp. 5–6; E. Isichei, *Victorian Quakers* (London, 1970), pp. 223–4; A.J.P. Taylor, 'John Bright: Hero or Humbug?' in C. Wrigley, ed., *From Napoleon to the*

manner whereby these historians and biographers have addressed this question has been superficial, with their accounts lacking both analytical drive and empirical heft. Treating this question only in passing, they have mainly drawn on a select number of Bright's speeches and letters, while ignoring a range of other primary material which paints a more complex picture. Extant interpretations of Bright's peace principles are therefore misleading. At the same time, scholars have failed to recognise that the same question intrigued many of Bright's contemporaries, engaging his supporters, detractors and other commentators in an intense and prolonged debate. The deeper historical roots of this question thus remain hidden. Moreover, the historiographical appreciation of the ideological context within which Bright operated is inadequate. This is due to the fact that a meaningful conversation between Bright's biographers, Victorianists, historians of the peace movement and historians of Quakerism has yet properly to commence.

This article offers the first sustained and contextual treatment of the question of whether Bright was a pacifist. It demonstrates that the Quaker peace testimony was the principal source of Bright's opposition to war, even if he repeatedly and emphatically denied this. The article thus challenges the prevalent historiographical assumption about Bright's peace principles. Drawing on under-used and hitherto untapped published and archival sources, it shows that Bright was loyal to the Friends' peace principles, and that on more than one occasion he tacitly promoted them to individuals with whom he corresponded, and adverted to them in front of some of his audiences. This was despite the fact that he also often tactically avoided addressing the problem of war from his religious

Second International: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Europe (London, 1995), pp. 254–7, at 255; W. Hinde, *Richard Cobden: A Victorian Outsider* (New Haven, CT, 1987), p. 249; W.H. van der Linden, *The International Peace Movement, 1815–1874* (Amsterdam, 1987), p. 462; H.F. Gregg, 'John Bright: Called to the Lord's Service', *Quaker Religious Thought*, lxxiii, no. 4 (1990), pp. 8–30, at 20; S.D. Bailey, *Peace is a Process* (London, 1993), p. 78; M. Taylor, *The Decline of British Radicalism, 1847–1860* (Oxford, 1995), p. 244; M. Howard, *War and the Liberal Conscience* (1978; London, 2008), p. 33; M. Ceadel, *The Origins of War Prevention: The British Peace Movement and International Relations, 1730–1854* (Oxford, 1996), p. 350; M. Ceadel, *Semi-Detached Idealists: The British Peace Movement and International Relations, 1854–1945* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 34, 44; P. Laity, *The British Peace Movement, 1870–1914* (Oxford, 2001), p. 24; S. Holton, 'John Bright, Radical Politics, and the Ethos of Quakerism', *Albion*, xxxiv (2002), pp. 584–605, at 597; cf. S.S. Holton, *Quaker Women: Personal Life, Memory and Radicalism in the Lives of Women Friends, 1780–1930* (London, 2007), p. 129. Only a very small number of historians have argued that the Quaker peace testimony informed Bright's lifelong opposition to war and his moral repugnance towards it. These include the Quaker author Margaret E. Hirst, born in 1882, and more recently the eminent historian of pacifism Peter Brock; see M.E. Hirst, 'John Bright and War', *Friends' Quarterly Examiner* (Jan. 1916), pp. 25–65; M.E. Hirst, *The Quakers in Peace and War: An Account of their Peace Principles and Practice* (London, 1923), pp. 274–8; M.E. Hirst, *John Bright: A Study* (London, [1945]), pp. 55–99; P. Brock, *Pacifism in Europe to 1914* (Princeton, NJ, 1972), pp. 351–5; P. Brock, *Varieties of Pacifism: A Survey from Antiquity to the Outset of the Twentieth Century* (4th edn, Syracuse, NY, 1998), p. 53; cf. P. Brock, *The Quaker Peace Testimony, 1660 to 1914* (York, 1990), p. 273. See also E.W. Orr, *The Quakers in Peace and War, 1920–1967* (Eastbourne, 1974), pp. 14–15. *The Oxford Companion to British History* describes Bright as 'the most belligerent of pacifists': E. Royle, 'Bright, John', in J. Cannon, ed., *The Oxford Companion to British History* (Oxford, 1997), p. 125.

denomination's absolutist standpoint, in order to avert criticism that his views were utopian, impractical and apolitical, and even if he sometimes appeared ready to endorse the use of force for the restoration of 'domestic' order.

The article comprises three parts. The first part focuses on the ideological context of the nineteenth-century British peace movement. A reconstruction of this context allows us to situate Bright properly within the peace movement, and is crucial for the accurate illumination of his anti-war views. The second part breaks new ground in revealing the contours of the debate, raging during Bright's lifetime and immediately following his death in 1889, over the extent of his allegiance to pacifism. Drawing on parliamentary debates and employing the metropolitan, provincial and colonial newspaper and periodical press, it shows that Victorians themselves were engrossed in a debate about whether Bright adhered to the 'extreme' views of Quakers and the Peace Society—the most important association within the wider peace movement. The article's third part examines Bright's views, ventilated in the public sphere and confided in his correspondence, which have long provided ammunition to those biographers and historians arguing that he was not a pacifist. The article re-evaluates these views against overlooked pieces of evidence from Bright's diaries, speeches and letters which suggest that the opposite held true. Bright's peace principles cannot be fully understood unless they are examined in conjunction with those of his close political partner, Manchester School associate and Anti-Corn Law League comrade, Richard Cobden (1804–65).[5] As this article demonstrates, in matters of war and peace the two political allies were not birds of a feather, as most historians have assumed, even though they shared tactics. Addressing the question of whether Bright was a pacifist allows for a major reassessment of the peace thinking of one of the most influential reform- and liberal-minded political figures of modern Britain. In demonstrating that the source of Bright's policy position on war was indeed his denomination's Christian pacifist credo, the article restores religion to its proper place as the central component of his political thought and philosophy, which historians and his biographers have either played down or insufficiently appreciated. In a broader sense, the article opens up a window onto an age when war was not merely a practical question of foreign policy and geopolitics, but also—and more crucially—a religious and moral question.[6]

5. On Cobden and Bright, see N. McCord, 'Cobden and Bright in Politics, 1846–1857', in R. Robson, ed., *Ideas and Institutions of Victorian Britain: Essays in Honour of George Kitson Clark* (London, 1967), pp. 87–114; and Reed, *Cobden and Bright*.

6. On the centrality of religion in nineteenth-century peace thinking, see C. Barrett, 'Peace, Pacifism, and Religion', in I. Sharp, ed., *A Cultural History of Peace in the Age of Empire* (London, 2020), pp. 73–92.

The issue of the nature of Bright's peace principles becomes a case-study in the importance of religious and denominational convictions in Victorian politics, and the historiographical challenges of explaining why these convictions mattered. Religion was inseparable from nineteenth-century political culture. Politics in the mid-Victorian period, as Jonathan Parry has convincingly argued, 'cannot be understood if it is treated merely as a secular activity'.[7] More recently, Simon Skinner has noted that well into the nineteenth century 'religion and politics … were for many coterminous', and that various thorny religious questions 'were the pith and marrow of political debate'.[8] Policy positions on reform, other domestic matters and foreign affairs were frequently directed by religious sectarianism and denominational affiliation. Almost every single British prime minister in the long nineteenth century faced significant political crises which centred on religion.[9] Religion also moulded the 'approach to political action' of Victorian parliamentarians and statesmen, with Gladstone being the prime example.[10] Yet even though in this period 'politics was religious, and religion political',[11] many politicians recognised that, in a society increasingly defined by pluralism while also witnessing the first stirrings of secularism,[12] politics ought to be a science of pragmatism. To win voters' hearts and minds and to make a strong case for their policy positions, politicians often donned the mantle of the 'practical' lawmaker and statesman by quietening—but by no means discarding—their religious convictions, and putting forward arguments which were primarily utilitarian. Bright was a case in point, since he cautiously sought to give his politics and principles of peace a practical edge, rooting them in prudential, economic and Manchester School arguments. In this he resembled not only his fellow Quaker MPs, but also other contemporary politicians such as the Congregationalist secretary of the Peace Society, Henry Richard. After taking his seat in parliament as Liberal MP for Merthyr Tydfil in 1868, Richard refused to debate the question of war on the absolutist basis of his Christian pacifist convictions, since he recognised that 'no one would be safe from ridicule here who would attempt to bring our national policy, and especially our foreign policy, to the test of a severe

7. J.P. Parry, *Democracy and Religion: Gladstone and the Liberal Party, 1867–1875* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 5.

8. S. Skinner, 'Religion', in D.M. Craig and J. Thompson, eds, *Languages of Politics in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Basingstoke, 2013), pp. 93–117, at 93. See also G.I.T. Machin, *Politics and the Churches in Great Britain, 1832 to 1868* (Oxford, 1977); G.I.T. Machin, *Politics and the Churches in Great Britain, 1869 to 1921* (Oxford, 1987).

9. F.M. Turner, *Contesting Cultural Authority: Essays in Victorian Intellectual Life* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 25.

10. B. Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795–1865* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 340–72, at 340. See also M. Wheeler, *William Ewart Gladstone: The Heart and Soul of a Statesman* (Oxford, 2025).

11. A. Hawkins, *Modernity and the Victorians* (Oxford, 2022), p. 88. See also A. Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture: 'Habits of Heart and Mind'* (Oxford, 2015), pp. 8–10.

12. W.C. Lubenow, *Secular Foundations of the Liberal State in Victorian Britain* (Woodbridge, 2024).

Christian morality'.[13] The wellspring of a policy position did not always flow directly into the articulation and advocacy of that policy and, as a result, scholars have been much misled into thinking that Bright was not a pacifist since he frequently disclaimed any link between his denominational identity and his politics and principles of peace. To get to the heart of the matter a deeper incision must thus be made into the historical record. In doing so, the article follows Parry's approach of situating Victorian politicians in the appropriate intellectual and cultural context, by considering their 'political practice' while paying serious 'attention to the importance of contemporary ideas and values'.[14]

I

'[G]reat Paladin of Peace!': this was how *Punch, or, The London Charivari* eulogised Bright in a poem published shortly after his death on 27 March 1889.[15] The accompanying illustration (Fig. 1) showed Bright's body lying in state and holding a silver trumpet and an olive branch—a quintessential symbol of peace.[16] The poem and the illustration reflected the indelible place Bright held in public consciousness, not only as a great statesman, but also as a leading voice of the peace movement. Yet the failure of some of his biographers and many historians to consider his thought in the light of the peace movement has led to several misunderstandings. For instance, a recent biographer, Bill Cash, identifies Bright and Cobden as leaders of the Peace Society which, in Cash's view, sent a deputation to St Petersburg in 1854 to avert war between Britain and Russia.[17] The *Historical Dictionary of the Friends* (*Quakers*) also identifies Bright as leader of the Peace Society.[18] Nothing could be further from the truth. The two political partners were not members of the Peace Society, despite their association with some of its figureheads, and despite their participation in peace conferences.[19] It was not the Peace Society which sent the deputation to the

13. Quoted in M. Ceadel, 'Gladstone and a Liberal Theory of International Relations', in P. Ghosh and L. Goldman, eds, *Politics and Culture in Victorian Britain: Essays in Memory of Colin Matthew* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 74–94, at 77.

14. J. Parry, *The Politics of Patriotism: English Liberalism, National Identity and Europe, 1830–1886* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 31. Parry's approach to Victorian political history is summarised in P. Readman and G. Thomas, 'Introduction', in P. Readman and G. Thomas, eds, *Culture, Thought and Belief in British Political Life Since 1800: Essays in Honour of Jonathan Parry* (Woodbridge, 2024), pp. 1–13, at 6–7.

15. *Punch, or, The London Charivari*, xcvi, 6 Apr. 1889, p. 162.

16. Bright's supporters would have found some of the militarist themes and overtones of the poem and the illustration inappropriate. Indeed, Bright himself was not a fan of *Punch*, and at one point he had privately described it as 'coarse & vulgar': London, British Library [hereafter BL], Bright Papers, Add. MS 62079, fo. 12r, Bright to William Hargreaves, 1 Jan. 1855.

17. Cash, *John Bright*, p. 208.

18. M.P. Abbott, M.R. Chijioke, P. Dandelion and J.W. Oliver, Jr, eds, *Historical Dictionary of the Friends* (*Quakers*) (Lanham, MD, 2003), p. 31.

19. N.C. Edsall, *Richard Cobden, Independent Radical* (Cambridge, MA, 1986), p. 230. See also Appendix in Ceadel, *Origins*, pp. 518–39, at 536, which lists Bright and Cobden only under

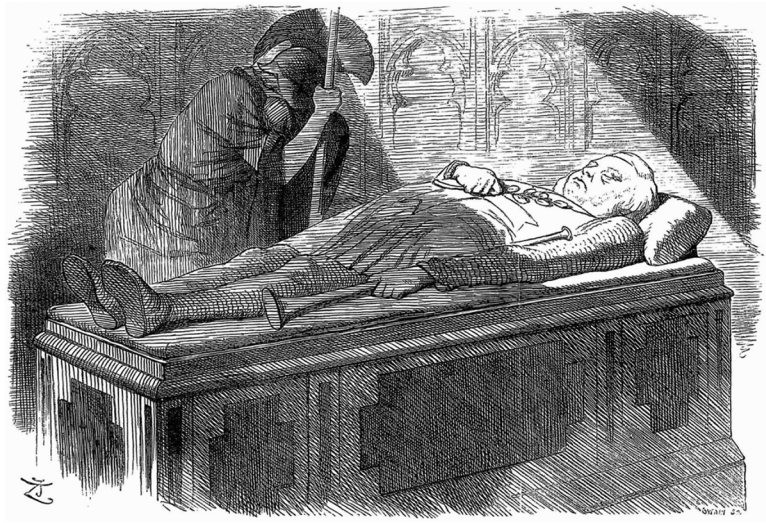

Figure 1: 'John Bright. Born, Nov. 16, 1811. Died, March 27, 1889. "The Silver Trumpet's Sound is Still!"', *Punch, or, The London Charivari*, 6 Apr. 1889, xcvi, p. 163.

Russian Emperor, but the Religious Society of Friends.[20] Such factual mistakes are symptomatic of how poorly integrated biographical accounts of Bright are with scholarship on the nineteenth-century peace movement. This section draws on Martin Ceadel's work to map the peace movement's ideological 'tendencies' of pacifism and the non-absolutist 'pacificism' onto various groups and denominations, in order to situate the peace-mindedness of Bright in context and thus to demonstrate his emergence as a figurehead of the peace movement during the Crimean War. Such contextual groundwork is necessary for a proper consideration of the question this article seeks to answer.

The peace movement in Britain began between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, although some of the ideas which informed it had a much earlier intellectual pedigree.[21] Of considerable importance to its early supporters was the Quaker peace testimony, the origins of which can be traced to the mid-seventeenth century. During the English Civil War there was diversity of opinion among early Friends concerning the use of force, but after the Restoration they became committed to 'non-resistance'—the term used

'Additional Names on Peace Congress Committee as listed at the Conference of the Friends of Peace, 12 June 1850'.

20. S. Frick, 'The Quaker Deputation to Russia: January–February 1854', *Journal of the Friends' Historical Society*, lii (1969), pp. 78–96.

21. The term 'peace movement', however, would not enter public discourse until the 1840s, and would be used more regularly in the second half of that decade: Ceadel, *Origins*, p. 336.

to describe the total rejection of war, prior to the coinage of the term 'pacifism' at the turn of the twentieth century.[22] In 1660 George Fox, the founder of Quakerism, together with other Friends, published the *Declaration from the Harmless & Innocent People of God Called Quakers*, which openly avowed their peace testimony. As professed by early Friends, their peace testimony derived from, and embodied, the irenic ethos of the New Testament.[23] The *Rules of Discipline of the Religious Society of Friends*, first published in 1783, similarly declared that the 'ancient and honourable testimony against being concerned in bearing arms, or fighting ... [was] agreeable to the nature and design of the Christian religion, and to the universal love and grace of God'.[24] The testimony also harmonised with the Quaker doctrine of the inner or inward light, which stipulated that an element of God was to be found in every human being.[25] Human life was thus viewed as inviolable. The Quakers' absolutist position would later become known as 'the "extreme" or "abstract" view of peace'.[26] In nineteenth-century debates about war, these terms would often be used interchangeably or concomitantly with the phrase 'peace-at-any-price' or 'peace-at-all-price'.

A vigorous exposition of Quaker pacifism appeared in the early nineteenth century in the essays of Jonathan Dymond (1796–1828), 'the most intellectual Quaker writer' of this period, who later joined the Peace Society.[27] Dymond's *An Inquiry into the Accordancy of War with the Principles of Christianity*, first published in 1823, critically examined the question of the lawfulness of war for Christians. Here Dymond posited a supersessionist theological argument linked to the doctrine of progressive revelation: the New Covenant, a more complete and perfect moral system, supplanted Mosaic law; the implication was that the injunctions to the Jews and the bellicose passages of the Old Testament were not binding upon Christians.[28] Dymond also exposed the spuriousness of those arguments which selectively drew on the New Testament to demonstrate that

22. M. Ceadel, 'The Quaker Peace Testimony and its Contribution to the British Peace Movement: An Overview', *Quaker Studies*, vii (2002), pp. 9–29, at 12; Laity, *British Peace Movement*, pp. 7–8. See also P. Dandelion, *The Quakers: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2008), p. 14; L. Valentine, 'Quakers, War, and Peacemaking', in S.W. Angell and P. Dandelion, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Quaker Studies* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 363–76, at 366; and T.C. Kennedy, 'Quakers', in T. Larsen and M. Ledger-Lomas, eds, *The Oxford History of Protestant Dissenting Traditions*, III: *The Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, 2017), pp. 79–98, at 97.

23. [George Fox], *A Declaration from the Harmless & Innocent People of God, Called, Quakers Against all Sedition Plotters & Fighters in the World* ([London], [1684]), pp. 1–6.

24. *Rules of Discipline of the Religious Society of Friends, with Advices: Being Extracts from the Minutes and Epistles of their Yearly Meeting, Held in London, from its First Institution* (3rd edn, London, 1834), p. 287.

25. Ceadel, 'Quaker Peace Testimony', p. 12.

26. Laity, *British Peace Movement*, p. 8.

27. Hirst, *Quakers in Peace and War*, p. 248.

28. Jonathan Dymond, *An Inquiry into the Accordancy of War with the Principles of Christianity, and an Examination of the Philosophical Reasoning by which it is Defended: with Observations on some of the Causes of War, and on some of its Effects* (4th edn, London, 1843), pp. 51–3. For a more detailed discussion of Dymond's *Inquiry*, see P. Spanou, 'Reintroducing Jonathan Dymond (1796–1828): A

Christians could fight wars. Moreover, he offered a spirited refutation of William Paley's theory of 'just war', as outlined in the latter's *The Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (1785). The defensiveness and justice of war were, in Dymond's verdict, notoriously complex issues and almost impossible to prove. Besides, if a party embarked on a military campaign for defensive purposes and gained success, it would soon become the aggressor. Paley's analysis of the justice of wars was thus fallacious, argued Dymond, and the truth of the matter was that '[w]ar must be wholly forbidden, or allowed without restriction to defence; for no definitions of lawful and unlawful war, will be, or can be, attended to'.[29] The *Inquiry* became 'nineteenth-century Britain's most celebrated pacifist text'.[30] Dymond remained highly influential within the ranks of the peace movement well after his untimely death in 1828, and his works continued to be cited much later into the century. Bright was familiar with Dymond's works and considered them to be of the utmost moral significance.[31]

Dymond and his co-religionists were at the heart of the peace movement. Yet Quakers and other pacifists were a minority within its ranks. The majority of the movement's supporters were 'pacificists': a term which also entered English usage around the turn of the twentieth century, and which most scholars have continued to apply to the nineteenth century since its popularisation in the historiography by Ceadel.[32] Whereas pacifists stood on the absolutist religious and moral premise of the unconditional rejection of all war, 'pacificists' were reform-minded individuals who sought to abolish war through practical measures, such as non-intervention, arbitration, the promotion of free trade, disarmament and the establishment of international organisations. However, unlike pacifists most 'pacificists' did not entirely shut the door to the possibility of the defensive use of force.[33] The peace movement, therefore, had 'two tendencies'.[34]

These tendencies were embodied in the 'two-tier structure' of the London Peace Society, founded in 1816 by a group of Quakers and other pacifists, and destined to become 'the most important British peace association for the next hundred years'.[35] The Peace Society's 'top tier' was pacifist, while its 'bottom tier' was 'pacificist'.[36] However, well into the nineteenth century most contemporaries viewed the Peace Society as a

Quaker Pacifist Powerhouse', *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, xxx, no. 4 (2025), pp. 20–33.

29. Dymond, *Inquiry*, pp. 77–8.
30. Ceadel, *Origins*, p. 223.
31. See discussion below.
32. Laity, *British Peace Movement*, p. 9; M. Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain, 1914–1945: The Defining of a Faith* (Oxford, 1980), p. 3.
33. Ceadel, *Origins*, p. 2.
34. Ibid.
35. Laity, *British Peace Movement*, p. 13.
36. Ceadel, *Origins*, p. 225.

decidedly pacifist association.[37] This was not an entirely inaccurate view, given that membership of its central committee was only open to pacifists, most of whom were Quakers—major benefactors of the Society.[38] The Peace Society's monthly periodical organ, *Herald of Peace*, sometimes promoted 'pacificist' measures for the eradication or war, but its core was pacifist.[39] Other dissenting denominations such as Congregationalists and Baptists supported the Peace Society.[40] The early decades of the Peace Society were marked by its indefatigable efforts to spread through various publications its Christian pacifist message, although later on it began assuming a more activist and political stance.[41]

Contemporaries acknowledged the bipartite ideological configuration of the Peace Society and the peace movement more generally. At the Edinburgh Peace Conference in 1853, Duncan McLaren, the city's Lord Provost and Bright's brother-in-law, stated that:

> The Peace Society consists of two sections—those who hold the principle that war in every form and for every purpose is unlawful, as being opposed to the precepts of Christianity, and to the whole spirit of the New Testament ... Other members, again, do not hold these principles, but still they cordially concur with the first-mentioned class in deprecating the war spirit wherever it may be found, and in doing every thing in their power to repress it.[42]

Yet supporters of the peace movement faced an important problem. Their critics, sometimes due to ignorance or more often on purpose, labelled all of them as pacifists holding the 'abstract' or 'extreme' principle. 'We have been misrepresented', complained McLaren, 'as being all non-resistants'.[43] This misrepresentation especially aggravated Cobden, who had by this time disavowed his youthful Christian pacifism and converted to 'pacificist' ideas.[44] Although an Anglican, Cobden maintained a deep respect for Quakers, but believed that their 'extreme' principle of non-resistance belonged to a utopian realm. For Cobden, pacifism's absolutist ethos was irreconcilable with his own reformist, Manchester School

37. Ceadel, *Semi-Detached Idealists*, p. 23.
38. Laity, *British Peace Movement*, p. 13.
39. 'Only upon the principle that *all* war is sinful, can *any* war be certainly prevented ... The plea for the lawfulness of defensive war has been found broad enough to cover all the wars which history records; whilst the fine-spun theory of a possible case, such as history can nowhere supply, is a mere phantom of the imagination': *The Herald of Peace, for the Years 1848, 1849, and to June 1850*, new ser., vi (London, [1850]), p. 8.
40. Laity, *British Peace Movement*, p. 3; E.W. Sager, 'The Social Origins of Victorian Pacifism', *Victorian Studies*, xxiii (1980), pp. 211–36, at 213.
41. S. Conway, 'The Politicization of the Nineteenth-Century Peace Society', *Historical Research*, lxvi (1993), pp. 267–83.
42. *Report of the Proceedings of the Peace Conference at Edinburgh, October 12th and 13th, 1853* (Edinburgh, 1853), p. 3.
43. Ibid, p. 4.
44. M. Ceadel, 'Cobden and Peace', in A. Howe and S. Morgan, eds, *Rethinking Nineteenth-Century Liberalism: Richard Cobden Bicentenary Essays* (Aldershot, 2006), pp. 189–207, at 191.

agenda predicated on the political realities of free trade and commerce—the 'grand panacea', as he had famously called it.[45] Writing in early November 1851 to Henry Richard, secretary of the Peace Society, Cobden warned that if the peace 'agitation is to be based exclusively upon the non-resistant principle, it will cease to occupy its present position in the domain of practical politics'.[46] There was no doubt, he wrote in September 1853 shortly before the Edinburgh Peace Conference to the city's Lord Provost, that the peace movement's 'soul' was 'the Quaker sentiment against all war', and that '[w]ithout the stubborn zeal of the "Friends" there would be no Peace Society and no Peace Conference'.[47] The problem was that the peace movement's critics mischievously portrayed all peace-minded individuals as Quakers because, as Cobden recognised, 'the "non-resistant" principle puts us out of court as practical politicians of the present day'.[48] It was for this reason Cobden continuously stressed that he only approached the question of peace as 'a practical man'.[49] In parliament, he took great pains to demonstrate his non-absolutist stance, tactically pre-empting his critics by claiming 'the same standing ground in discussing this question of peace or war as any other hon. Gentleman', and explaining that he would 'deal with it as a politician, strictly on the principles of policy and expediency'—even going so far as to admit that he was 'prepared to assume that wars may be inevitable and necessary'.[50] This was the crux of his 'pacificism'. Painfully aware of the habitual perversion of his own views, Bright often followed Cobden's parliamentary tactics in debates about war.

The Edinburgh conference of 1853 was organised by the Peace Conference Committee, known as the Peace Congress Committee when it was first founded in 1848.[51] The Committee was distinct from the Peace Society, though it was ostensibly under its control given that the Committee's main administrator was the pacifist Congregationalist minister Henry Richard, secretary of the Peace Society between 1848 and 1885. Nonetheless, the Committee had a 'pacificist' basis, enabling individuals such as Cobden, who were wary of associating themselves with the

45. [Richard Cobden], *England, Ireland, and America* (2nd edn, London, 1835), p. 45. See also E. Wallace, 'The Political Ideas of the Manchester School', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, xxix (1960), pp. 122–38; P. Cain, 'Capitalism, War and Internationalism in the Thought of Richard Cobden', *British Journal of International Studies*, v (1979), pp. 229–47.

46. BL, Cobden Papers, Vol. XI, Add. MS 43657, fo. 112v, Cobden to Henry Richard, 9 Nov. 1851.

47. John Beveridge Mackie, *The Life and Work of Duncan McLaren* (2 vols, London, 1888), ii, p. 12.

48. Ibid.

49. Richard Cobden, *Speeches on Questions of Public Policy by Richard Cobden, M.P.*, ed. John Bright and James E. Thorold Rogers (London, 1880), pp. 509–10. 'Though I have often been accused of holding the non-resistance principle', Cobden wrote in a private letter published shortly after his death, 'my friends the Quakers, who constitute the original Peace Society, know that I do not profess their distinctive doctrine': *Pall Mall Gazette*, 10 Apr. 1865, p. 5.

50. Hansard, *Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd ser., House of Commons [hereafter *Hansard*], 5 June 1855, vol. 138, col. 1410.

51. See V.L. Lambert, 'The Dynamics of Transnational Activism: The International Peace Congresses, 1843–51', *International History Review*, xxxviii (2016), pp. 126–47.

pacifist-driven Peace Society, to become involved with the wider peace movement.[52] Although they were not members of the Peace Society, both Cobden and Bright attended the Edinburgh conference and delivered some of their most important anti-war speeches, at a time when the peace movement was experiencing a sense of crisis. Two years prior to the conference, the movement's influence had reached new heights: in 1851 it seemed to '[have] the ear of a large section of the public'.[53] The spirit of pacific liberal internationalism resonated in Joseph Paxton's glass-and-iron Crystal Palace in Hyde Park which housed the Great Exhibition, marking 'an era of visible progress', in Cobden's words.[54] The London Peace Congress held at Exeter Hall in July of the same year gave 'a fitting expression in living speech to the sentiment of which the Crystal Palace and its contents were the significant material symbol'.[55] But paeans to peace would soon be drowned by rising militarism and international discord. Victorians' crusading excitement for the liberation of the oppressed European nationalities (Poland, Hungary, Italy), as well as Louis Napoleon's *coup d'état* in December which led to an invasion scare, the passing of the Militia Act in 1852, and a resultant increase in military expenditure, eroded the peace movement's optimism.[56] The reopening of the perennial Eastern Question in 1853 that eventually sparked the Crimean War made things worse. Adding insult to injury, many 'pacificists' resolved that Britain's military response in support of an injured ally—Turkey—'was sufficiently defensive and politically enlightened to be justifiable'.[57] Such was the blow the peace movement sustained that it would not enjoy an analogous influence compared to the one it had in 1851 until the late 1920s.[58]

Following the outbreak of the Crimean War, Bright found himself alongside Cobden in the vanguard of the peace movement's opposition to it. While Bright took a leading role in challenging the Treasury bench for its decision to go to war alongside France to support the Ottomans, his religious denomination embarked on an extensive peace campaign. The deputation sent to St Petersburg in February 1854 was the first notable, albeit fruitless, attempt of the Religious Society of Friends to stop Britain's drift to war with Russia. At the core of the Friends' address to Tsar Nicholas I in the Winter Palace lay their peace testimony: '[W]e have, as a Christian church, uniformly upheld a testimony against all war, on the simple ground that it is utterly condemned by the precepts of Christianity, as well as altogether incompatible with the spirit of its Divine

52. Laity, *British Peace Movement*, p. 16.
53. Charles S. Miall, *Henry Richard, M.P.: A Biography* (London, 1889), p. 84.
54. BL, Cobden Papers, Vol. XXII, Add. MS 43668, fo. 133r, Cobden to W. Gardiner, 10 May 1851.
55. Henry Richard, *Memoirs of Joseph Sturge* (London, 1864), p. 456.
56. Ceadel, *Semi-Detached Idealists*, pp. 31–7; D. Nicholls, 'Richard Cobden and the International Peace Congress Movement, 1848–1853', *Journal of British Studies*, xxx (1991), pp. 351–76, at 367–8.
57. Ceadel, *Semi-Detached Idealists*, pp. 37–8.
58. Ibid, p. 32.

Founder, who is emphatically styled the "Prince of Peace"'.[59] Later that year, Friends circulated in Britain and Ireland 228,000 copies of a tract proclaiming that 'all War, on whatever plea of policy or of necessity, is unlawful under the Gospel Dispensation'.[60] This message echoed in a memorial to Prime Minister Lord Aberdeen, presented by a group of six Friends, and also forwarded by messenger to his cabinet ministers.[61] The Friends' campaign was already underway when the Peace Society resolved that 'the best mode of operations to be adopted ... is by a copious and systematic distribution of suitable Tracts'.[62] During the war, a staggering 600,000 copies of peace tracts and other publications were circulated across the country.[63]

Despite these efforts, the peace movement was haemorrhaging support. 'Are there 10 men in the House or 120 outside (excepting the Quakers) who are to be relied on?', Cobden asked the secretary of the Peace Society.[64] Increasingly isolated and shunned by their political allies, Cobden and Bright nonetheless continued to make interventions in and out of parliament. Bright's eloquent and affecting 'Angel of Death' speech on 23 February 1855, 'one of the most remarkable ever delivered in Parliament', was complimented 'by everybody', even moving to tears a woman in the galleries of the House of Commons.[65] Filled with amazement, Disraeli told Bright that '[he] would give all [he] ever had to have made that speech'.[66] Though much criticised in pro-war circles, Bright's 'Angel of Death' speech touched a chord with many of his countrymen. This and other speeches consolidated Bright's position as a leading voice of the peace movement, with the Peace Society publishing some of these speeches in pamphlet form to give them a wider circulation.[67] Alongside Cobden, Bright also used his celebrity status, gained during the Anti-Corn Law crusade, as one of the nation's most prominent political dissenters, to talk

59. *The Times*, 28 Feb. 1854, p. 12.

60. Robert Forster, *A Christian Appeal from the Society of Friends to their Fellow-Countrymen, on the Present War* (London, [1854]), p. [1]; S. Frick, 'The Christian Appeal of 1855: Friends' Public Response to the Crimean War', *Journal of the Friends' Historical Society*, lii (1970), pp. 203–10, at 209; P. Huddie, 'The Society of Friends in Ireland and the Crimean War, 1854–56', *Quaker History*, cii, no. 2 (2013), pp. 1–11, at 7.

61. London, Library of the Society of Friends, Friends House, 'Meeting for Sufferings Minutes Beginning First Month 1849', pp. 454, 474.

62. 'Special Fund for the Distribution of Tracts', *Herald of Peace* (1854), p. 36.

63. Between 1854 and 1855, 400,000 copies were printed; between 1855 and 1856, 200,000: 'Annual Report of the Peace Society', *Herald of Peace* (1855), p. 211; 'Report', *Herald of Peace* (1856), p. 64.

64. BL, Cobden Papers, Vol. XI, Add. MS 43657, unfoliated, Cobden to Henry Richard, 22 Sept. 1854.

65. [Malcolm Stark], *The Life of the Right Hon. John Bright, M.P. By a London Journalist* (London, [1879]), p. 7; London, UCL Special Collections [hereafter UCL], MS OGDEN/65 (2), Bright Letters, unfoliated, Bright to Margaret Elizabeth Leatham, 23 Feb. 1855; Manchester, Manchester Central Library [hereafter MCL], Wilson Papers, GB127.M20/Index/477, Vol. 22, unfoliated, Bright to George Wilson, 27 Feb. 1855.

66. John Bright, *The Diaries of John Bright*, ed. R.A.J. Walling (London, 1930), p. 190.

67. For example, [Peace Society], *War with Russia. Speech of John Bright, Esq. M.P., Delivered in the House of Commons, on Friday, the 31st of March, 1854* (London, 1854).

directly to the country from the public platform. This home-front 'war' of words and ideas proved gruelling. It also seemed futile because, as Bright would later recall, the nation's judgement 'was disturbed, argument was of no avail, facts that were true were disputed, passions were excited'.[68] Earlier in the war some of Bright's disgruntled Manchester constituents had burned him in effigy for his peace views.[69] But this did not stop him from continuing to work alongside Cobden to counter the nation's bellicose sentiments. Yet the mental toll the war had taken on him eventually led him to a nervous breakdown in early 1856. Some years after the end of the war, Cobden would emphasise 'the utter uselessness of raising one's voice in opposition to war when it has once begun'. For what did Bright's anti-war pleas achieve, Cobden asked? 'Why, they burnt him in effigy for his pains'.[70]

When Lord Stratford de Redcliffe, Britain's Ambassador to Constantinople, visited the bombarded city of Sebastopol after the end of the war, he reportedly said that 'John Bright is fully borne out by all this ... If this is a sample of the effects of war, who would not be willing to join his peace party? It is more like the crater of a volcano than a ruined city'.[71] Though few proved willing to join Bright's 'peace party', the arduous battle of words and ideas he fought together with Cobden during the Crimean War established him as one of the leading voices of the peace movement, but at huge personal and political cost.

II

'I have been asked on several occasions', admitted Bright towards the end of his life, '"[w]hat do you think about the doctrine of the Peace Society, or of your own Religious Body, in their opposition to all War however necessary or however just it may seem to be, or however much you are provoked and injured?"'[72] Bright's acknowledgement of his contemporaries' curiosity and mystification regarding his opinions provides a point of entry into the debate on the question of his loyalty to the 'extreme' views of Quakers and the Peace Society. Though most Victorians agreed that Bright remained undefeated as the most skilled orator of both

68. John Bright, *Speeches of the Right Hon. John Bright, M.P., Delivered in Bradford, on the Occasion of the Inauguration of the Cobden Memorial, July 25, 1877, together with a Sketch of the History of Cobden, Bright, and the Anti-Corn Law League* (London, [1877]), p. 25.

69. The effigy was just over seven feet high and wore a broad-brimmed hat—a standard symbol of Quakerism. It also had a placard inscribed with the words 'The friend of Nicholas' (i.e., the Russian Emperor Nicholas I), and was accompanied by a verse with a comical pun: 'To brighten up the Quaker's fame / We'll put his body to the flame, / And shout in mighty England's name, / "Send him to Old Nicholas!"': *John Bull*, 2 Dec. 1854, p. 763.

70. *Carlisle Journal*, 31 Oct. 1862, p. 6.

71. James Henry Skene, *With Lord Stratford in the Crimean War* (London, 1883), p. 340.

72. John Bright, 'Introductory Words', in Jonathan Dymond, *War: Its Causes, Consequences, Lawfulness, etc.* (Manchester, 1889), p. iii.

platform and parliament, they were profoundly divided over the nature of his peace views.[73] Whether they had a partisan axe to grind, or they simply took an interest in this question, many contemporaries keenly scrutinised his well-publicised parliamentary and public speeches—his 'political sermons', as he once described them[74]—for any clues. This section breaks new ground in uncovering this debate, which played out in parliament and in the press, thereby illuminating its deeper historical roots. It demonstrates that during Bright's lifetime and immediately following his death his views became a point of contention, with many contemporaries asserting that Bright's peace principles stemmed from his denominational commitments, despite protests from many of his political allies to the contrary.

Cobden's views were also the subject of debate, with some commentators denouncing him for his purported 'Quakerism', and others arguing that 'he never adhered to the Quaker doctrine of absolute non-resistance' and that '[h]is views were eminently sane and practical'.[75] Yet his political partner's views were the topic of fiercer and more prolonged debate. This was not least because of Bright's Quakerism, but also due to his much-lauded oratory, which put him in the spotlight. Moreover, Bright outlived Cobden by more than two decades and had a more extensive official career: he was MP for Durham (1843–7), Manchester (1847–57) and Birmingham/Birmingham Central (1857–85/1885–9); and held cabinet positions in Gladstone's ministries three times (President of the Board of Trade, 1868–70; Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, 1873–4 and 1880–82). Bright's denominational identity and multifaceted public life thus invited ample and continuous scrutiny. The Crimean War might not have originated the debate between those convinced that Bright harboured 'extreme' peace principles and those who believed otherwise, but it certainly intensified it.[76] On 13 March 1854, shortly before Britain's

73. On Bright's oratory, see P. Joyce, *Democratic Subjects: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 98–104; and E.F. Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform: Popular Liberalism in the Age of Gladstone, 1860–1880* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 375–7. One contemporary described Bright as 'the prince of English speakers': J. Morrison Davidson, *Eminent Radicals in and out of Parliament* (London, 1880), p. 24.

74. Quoted in Charles McLaren, 'Reminiscences of John Bright', *North American Review*, clv, no. 430 (1892), p. 323.

75. 'Reviews: Cobden's Speeches', *Saturday Review*, xxix, no. 763 (June 1870), p. 773; William Clarke, 'Richard Cobden', *British Quarterly Review*, lxxv, no. 149 (Jan. 1882), p. 169. See also Richard Gowing, *Richard Cobden* (London, 1891), p. 108. Regarding the Manchester School's and Cobden's attitude to peace, Goldwin Smith wrote the following: 'Peace-mongers, Quakers, and Little Englanders are epithets freely bestowed on us by the Jingoes ... We did not preach defencelessness, a tame submission to wrong. Cobden said that in a just war, though he could not serve in the field, he would serve in the hospital': Goldwin Smith, 'The Manchester School', *Contemporary Review*, lxvii (Mar. 1895), p. 379.

76. Bright did not speak in parliament during the Don Pacifico debate in 1850, though in a letter to one of his constituents which appeared in the newspaper press he advocated non-intervention: Taylor, 'Bright and the Crimean War', p. 506; *Leeds Mercury*, 13 July 1850, p. 5. Bright spoke in parliament during the 1852 Militia Bill debate, but his views do not seem to have been dismissed as 'abstract' or 'extreme'. However, Cobden was wrongly identified by some members of parliament as

declaration of war against Russia, Bright expressed in the Commons his indignation over the frivolity Palmerston and other ministers showed towards the critical state of foreign affairs, only for Palmerston to respond by calling Bright 'the hon[ourable] and *reverend* Gentleman'.[77] This was Palmerston's shrewd way of roundly dismissing Bright's anti-war views as religious and apolitical. Palmerston's use of the word 'reverend' hit a nerve, but not in Bright. It was Cobden who interrupted Palmerston by rising to order and calling the adjective Palmerston used to describe Bright 'flippant and undeserved'.[78] The following month a doggerel in *Punch* deliberated over 'The Right Side of the Question, and the "Bright" Side of the Question', with the anti-war chorus led by Bright and the Manchester School declaring: 'Non-resistance is our suggestion'.[79] This was a crude generalisation since the Manchester School's ideology had a practical 'pacificist' bent which Cobden eagerly propounded. Such a misconception was widespread in the press, which often applied the label 'peace-at-all-price' to the 'men of Manchester'.[80] For the Tory *John Bull*, Bright's burning in effigy by his Manchester constituents was the inevitable result of '[his] excessive anxiety for the briskness of the cotton trade, coupled with his sectarian prejudice against war, even in the most righteous cause'.[81]

Newspapers and periodicals of various political leanings put forward the same argument: Bright's Quakerism was a definitive sign of his advocacy of the principle of non-resistance; consequently his opinions on the question of the justice and necessity of the Crimean War could not be taken seriously. An article in the learned *Saturday Review* resolved that it was 'a waste of time' to examine Bright's anti-war arguments in any detail, given that '[a]n opponent of war in general necessarily finds himself at a disadvantage in a controversy on the merits of a particular war; for however logically he may reason on the premises of his adversaries, it is felt that they cannot be his own'.[82] Even some peace-minded individuals were of the same opinion. In his *Tracts for the Present Crisis*, Sir Arthur Hallam Elton, seventh baronet, distanced himself from Bright, who seemed to hold the extreme view 'that all war is unjustifiable'.[83] Some contemporaries also saw in the lines of Alfred Tennyson's poem *Maud* (1855), 'This broad-brim'd hawker of holy things, / Whose ear is stuff'd with cotton, and rings / Even in dreams to the chink of his pence, / This huckster put

a member of the Peace Society: *Hansard*, 3 May 1852, vol. 131, cols 158, 170. The Manchester and Edinburgh Peace Conferences drew more critical attention to Bright's and Cobden's peace principles, which were lampooned and caricatured in *Punch*: for example, *Punch*, xxiv (1853), pp. 68, 70–71, 79, 80, 85, 98; xxv (1853), pp. 91, 163, 176, 178–9, 181, 195, 227.

77. *Hansard*, 13 Mar. 1854, vol. 131, col. 680 (emphasis added).
78. Ibid.
79. *Punch*, 15 Apr. 1854, xxvi, no. 666, p. 153.
80. For example, A Grumbler, 'The Bright Side of War', *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country*, lii, no. 309 (Sept. 1855), pp. 297–8.
81. *John Bull*, 4 Dec. 1854, p. 759.
82. 'Mr. Bright at Home', *Saturday Review*, 2 Feb. 1856, p. 245.
83. Arthur Hallam Elton, *Tracts for the Present Crisis* (2nd edn, Bristol, [1855]), p. 117.

down war!', a thinly veiled attack against Bright and his co-religionists—many of whom were seen in public wearing broad-brimmed hats, and were typically portrayed by their detractors as unpatriotic frauds only caring about cotton and profit.[84] In the radical *Westminster Review*, George Eliot conjectured that the 'broad-brim'd hawker' was a reference to Bright, and she expressed the hope that the poet laureate would edit out these distasteful lines in a later edition.[85] Tennyson evidently read Eliot's anonymous review, for in some notes about the poem left to his son he defended himself by stating that these lines were not meant as an attack against Bright, and that he 'did not know at the time that [Bright] was a Quaker'.[86] Notwithstanding the implausibility of Tennyson's claim, the important point here is that throughout the war Bright's peace principles intrigued many contemporaries, and served as the basis for commentary, debate and critique. Less than a decade after the end of the war, its first major historian, Alexander Kinglake, wrote that Bright and Cobden 'had forfeited their hold upon the ear of the country' because 'they had adopted and put forward, in their strenuous ways, some of the more extravagant doctrines of the Peace Party'. Bright, in particular, was defined by 'the immoderate width of his views on the lawfulness of wars'.[87] Kinglake's assertion proved controversial, with many contemporary biographers of Bright rejecting it and pointing instead to the utilitarian manner whereby he considered the war 'in a practical light, guided by the blue books'.[88]

Although the Crimean War marked the acute phase of contention, discussions about Bright's peace views would continue unabated. The General Election of 1857 resulted in both Bright and Cobden losing their parliamentary seats. Critics pointed to the former's 'dogged and impervious sectarianism' as a reason for Manchester's rejection of him.[89] Not long after, Bright returned to parliament as MP for Birmingham while news of the Indian uprising flooded Britain. Prior to his election, Bright issued an address to the Birmingham electors, declaring that he could not 'oppose such measures as may be deemed necessary to suppress the existing

84. Alfred Tennyson, *Maud, and Other Poems* (new edn, London, 1856), p. 38. *Punch*'s cartoons often portrayed Bright wearing a broad-brimmed hat, even though he had by this time discarded the distinctive Quaker garb: Punch, *The Rt. Hon. John Bright M.P.: Cartoons from the Collection of 'Mr. Punch'* (London, 1878).

85. [George Eliot], 'Belles Lettres', *Westminster Review*, lxiv, no. 126 (Oct. 1855), pp. 599–600. Bright critiqued *Maud* in his speech at a *soirée* in Manchester's Corn Exchange; see P. Spanou, 'Peace-minded Critics of Tennyson's *Maud*', *Notes and Queries*, lxxii (2025), pp. 278–9.

86. [Hallam Tennyson], *Alfred Lord Tennyson: A Memoir by his Son* (2 vols, London, 1897), i, p. 403.

87. Alexander William Kinglake, *The Invasion of the Crimea: Its Origin, and an Account of its Progress down to the Death of Lord Raglan* (3rd edn, 8 vols, Edinburgh, 1863), i, pp. 408, 420.

88. Benjamin Rhodes, *John Bright: Statesman and Orator* (London, 1885), p. 27. See also George Barnett Smith, *The Life and Speeches of the Right Honourable John Bright, M.P.* (2 vols, London, 1881), i, p. 360; Lewis Apjohn, *John Bright and the Party of Peace, Retrenchment, and Reform* (London, 1885), pp. 126–8; Francis Watt, *The Life and Opinions of John Bright* (London, [1889]), pp. 122–5.

89. For example, Francis P. Rickards, *Manchester and John Bright* (London, 1859), p. 10.

disorder. To restore order to India is mercy to India'.[90] Bright's address inevitably drew the attention of the press. The prevalent assumption was that he prudently recanted his 'extreme' principles and reconfigured his politics of peace, though some remained unconvinced and still others found it amusing that Bright now represented a constituency famous for its large-scale gun-manufacturing industry.[91] The hitherto 'uncompromising champion of the peace or non-resistance principle', noted an editorial of the *Liverpool Mercury*, 'considers it morally right, in this particular case of the Sepoy revolt, to act on war principles'.[92] It was as if the voice of the upright moralist of staunch pacifist convictions was drowned by the considerations of the practical statesman. '[T]o us it seems sufficiently plain that Mr. Bright has, both logically and practically, retracted that exaggerated and fanatical advocacy of peace principles which cost him his seat for Manchester.'[93] Citing Bright's words to Birmingham's electors, another editorial asked whether his eyes had finally been 'opened to the fact that the principle of non-resistance, however beautiful, and sublime, and commendable in theory, is, when reduced to practice, as utterly absurd and impracticable as it would be dangerous if stubbornly pursued?'[94] In a letter to the editor of the radical *Reynolds's Newspaper*, a correspondent declared that Bright was 'trying to reconcile two things which are utterly irreconcilable,—namely, his own claims to practical statesmanship with his fidelity to orthodox Quakerism'.[95] This apparent disjuncture would become a recurrent theme in commentaries on Bright's public life, with the *Vanity Fair* chromolithograph of Bright published in 1869 bearing the caption: 'Will the sentimental orator be lost in the practical Minister, or will both be extinguished?'[96]

For the next couple of decades, whenever there was a crisis—especially on the Continent—the nature of Bright's peace principles would resurface as a point of contention. The Italian question came to the fore in the years 1859–60, coinciding with rising Anglo-French tensions and an invasion scare begetting the Palmerston-initiated Royal Commission on the Defence of the United Kingdom.[97] In the Commons in August 1860, Bright inveighed against the 'absolute stupidity' of the military authorities and the proposals of the seven 'lunatics' who drew up the Commission's Report, which recommended a large-scale project of building fortifications for the defence of the royal dockyards and arsenals.[98] Many press

90. *Morning Post*, 10 Aug. 1857, p. 4.
91. 'Bright Absurdities', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, lxxxiv, no. 518 (Dec. 1858), pp. 743–61; 'Mr. Bright's Pilgrimage', *Saturday Review*, xx, no. 512 (19 Aug. 1865), p. 233.
92. *Liverpool Mercury*, 12 Aug. 1857, p. 8.
93. Ibid.
94. *Leeds Times*, 15 Aug. 1857, p. 4.
95. *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 7 Nov. 1858, p. 7.
96. *Vanity Fair*, 13 Feb. 1869, p. 180.
97. See Parry, *Politics of Patriotism*, pp. 221–41.
98. *Hansard*, 2 Aug. 1860, vol. 160, cols 508–9.

publications attacked Bright for his 'un-English' stance while extolling Palmerston's patriotic vigour. Bright's impractical Quaker peace principles, argued one newspaper editorial, would certainly not save the country from the French threat. 'The tenet of non-resistance to which he is bound by political tendencies and religious associations may be beautiful in the abstract, but it is not exactly the weapon with which England will be content to combat an invader.'[99] Earlier that year, the essayist W.R. Greg denounced Bright's non-interventionist speeches following France's annexation of Savoy and Nice. Bright's moral and Christian apostleship of peace, which urged 'to turn the left cheek to the enemy who smites them on the right', seemed hypocritical, according to Greg, since all Bright really cared about were economic matters and trade.[100]

The 1870s proved more warlike. In the summer of 1870 a seriously ill Bright, who was contemplating his resignation from Gladstone's cabinet, wrote to the Prime Minister to warn him against Britain's involvement in the Franco-Prussian war.[101] Later that year, Bright advised him to '[b]e strong for peace' and resist those urging him to respond to Russia's unilateral repudiation of the Black Sea Clauses of the Treaty of Paris of 1856.[102] The Eastern crisis later that decade saw Bright taking a stance on behalf of peace. Following his speech in Manchester's Free Trade Hall on 30 April 1878, he was confronted by 'Jingoes' who smashed his hat over his head.[103] The press also launched a sustained attack. Newspapers once again denounced Bright as 'un-English', and poured scorn over his 'extreme' view that 'war is not lawful under any circumstances'.[104] *The Spectator* scrutinised Bright's peace views, concluding that his 'real faith is the Quaker belief in the wickedness of all violence'.[105]

Following the British bombardment of Alexandria in July 1882 as a result of Ahmed Arabi's revolt against the Khedive of Egypt—an action which, as Jonathan Parry has put it, 'offended "sentimental" Liberals'—Bright resigned from office as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.[106] Responses to his resignation demonstrated the persistent debate over his peace principles. Gladstone pleaded with Bright on 12 July 1882, expressing the hope that he could 'rely on [his] wisdom, on [his] friendship, and on the prospect before [him] of being eminently useful on behalf of peace,

99. *Chelmsford Chronicle*, 27 July 1860, p. 3.
100. [William Rathbone Greg], 'Mr. Bright, Painted by Himself', *National Review*, x, no. 20 (Apr. 1860), pp. 540–41.
101. Trevelyan, *Life of John Bright*, pp. 417–18.
102. Quoted in W.E. Mosse, 'III. Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: The British Public and the War-Scare of November 1870', *Historical Journal*, vi (1963), pp. 44–5.
103. Trevelyan, *Life of John Bright*, p. 422.
104. For example, *Sheffield Daily Telegraph*, 25 Nov. 1876, p. 2.
105. 'Mr. Bright on War', *The Spectator*, xlix, no. 2526 (25 Nov. 1876), p. 1468.
106. J. Parry, *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain* (New Haven, CT, 1993), p. 291.

to do nothing abruptly'.[107] These words were in vain; Bright had already penned his resignation. But he had no hard feelings towards Gladstone. As he would later confide to the journalist G.W. Smalley, he thought that '[t]here [was] no purer soul than [Gladstone's]', and that nothing he said about the war was meant as criticism of the Liberal leader.[108] The fact remained, however, that Bright 'could not sleep for the roar of those English guns at Alexandria'.[109] Guided by his biting conscience, Gladstone wrote to Bright two days after his resignation to justify the government's course of action. Gladstone also disclosed his personal views about Bright's peace principles:

> I address you as one whom I suppose not to believe all use whatever of military force to be unlawful; as one who detests war in general & believes most wars to have been sad errors (in which I greatly agree with you) but who in regard to any particular use of force would look upon it for a justifying cause, & after it would endeavour to appreciate its actual effect.[110]

Gladstone thus considered his former cabinet minister as someone who did not hold 'abstract' principles. Yet Gladstone was in the minority. Queen Victoria found the resignation 'very illogical' since Bright 'had consented to all the acts, which had produced the present hostile measures in Egypt, & he ought to have resigned before, rather than now'.[111] 'He secedes not as a statesman, but as a Quaker', resolved one newspaper editorial.[112] Responding to a reader's letter on 23 September 1882, *The Spectator*'s editor was categorical: 'We do not understand Mr. Bright to oppose the Egyptian War in particular, but all wars'.[113]

Bright's death in 1889 saw an outpouring of obituaries engendering fresh discussions about his peace views. The *Morning Post*'s obituary claimed that Bright was '[e]ntirely convinced in his own mind that his peace-at-any-price views were the perfection of wisdom and beneficence'.[114] In an interview in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, Charles Pelham Villiers, one of Bright's comrades in the Anti-Corn Law movement, suggested that his late friend's vain opposition to the Crimean War seemed to be 'based on an extreme principle inapplicable to the special case', with the same

107. BL, Bright Papers, Vol. III, Add. MS 43385, fo. 303r, Copy of letter from Gladstone to Bright, 12 July 1882.
108. *Pall Mall Gazette*, 6 Nov. 1890, p. 3.
109. Ibid.
110. BL, Gladstone Papers, Vol. XXVIII, Add. MS 44113, fo. 179r, Copy of letter from Gladstone to Bright, 14 July 1882.
111. Windsor, The Royal Archives, Queen Victoria's Journals, RA VIC/MAIN/QVJ (W), p. 31, 16 July 1882 (Princess Beatrice's copies), available online via *Queen Victoria's Journals* (Proquest et al., 2012–), at http://www.queenvictoriasjournals.org/home.do (accessed 7 May 2026).
112. *Leicester Chronicle*, 22 July 1882, p. 8.
113. C.S, 'Mr. Bright [To the Editor of the "Spectator"]', *The Spectator*, lv, no. 2830 (23 Sept. 1882), p. 1225.
114. *Morning Post*, 28 Mar. 1889, p. 3.

principle inducing him to resign office in 1882.[115] Assessments such as these were hardly left uncontested. Writing in the *Contemporary Review*, the leading Congregationalist minister R.W. Dale pointed to Bright's *non*-absolutist convictions.[116] The German revolutionary Karl Blind voiced a similar opinion in the *Fortnightly Review*: Bright's religious affiliation and 'repugnance to army affairs' led to accusations that he was an advocate of 'peace at any price'. But this was 'a mistake; certainly an undue exaggeration', especially when considering the American Civil War during which Bright 'knew where to draw the line'.[117] Such was the conclusion of the obituarist in the *Scots Observer*.[118]

Bright's peace principles were by no means a topic of commentary restricted to the metropolitan British press. In reviewing newspaper reports from the Continent on Bright's death, *The Times*'s correspondent noted that the *Deutsche Zeitung* decried the ideas of the Manchester School and appeared to suggest that because Bright 'objected to wanton wars, he was an advocate of peace at any price'.[119] Across the Atlantic, the *New York Times*'s encomium to 'England's great statesman' declared that '[t]rue to his Quaker principles Mr. Bright was opposed to wars of all kinds'.[120] Newspapers across the British Empire, and especially Australia, also weighed in. Shortly before Bright's death, the Sydney-published *Protestant Standard* stated that '[t]he tenets of non-resistance' he and his co-religionists upheld were 'curiously inconsistent with political life'.[121] The obituarist in the Melbourne-published *Leader* found much in Bright's public life that was praiseworthy, but asserted that one of the reasons that 'militated' the public against him was 'the extreme view he took of international war' which '[a]ccording to his religious opinion … was unjustifiable under any conceivable circumstances'.[122] Because '[Bright] held the peace principles of the religious body to which he belonged', he expended much political capital, as another journal suggested.[123] Yet, in common with their metropolitan counterparts, Australia-based reporters disagreed over the matter. The *Tasmanian*'s obituarist, for instance, argued that the 'peace-at-any-price' term 'was not applicable to the deceased statesman'.[124] The interest in, and debates about, Bright's peace principles thus transcended geographical boundaries, and became

115. *Pall Mall Gazette*, 29 Mar. 1889, p. 2.
116. Robert William Dale, 'Mr. Bright', *Contemporary Review*, lv (May 1889), pp. 643–4.
117. Karl Blind, 'John Bright', *Fortnightly Review*, xlv, no. 269 (May 1889), p. 654.
118. 'John Bright', *Scots Observer*, i, no. 19 (30 Mar. 1889), p. 519.
119. *The Times*, 29 Mar. 1889, p. 5.
120. *New York Times*, 28 Mar. 1889, p. 5.
121. *Protestant Standard* [Sydney, NSW], 19 Jan. 1889, p. 4. The Australian newspapers cited are available online via *Trove*, the online portal of the National Library of Australia, at https://trove.nla.gov.au.
122. *Leader* [Melbourne, VIC], 6 Apr. 1889, p. 25.
123. *Evening Journal* [Adelaide, SA], 28 Mar. 1889, p. 3.
124. *Tasmanian* [Launceston, TAS], 30 Mar. 1889, p. 8.

one of the focal points in appraisals of the late statesman's public life. But what did Bright himself have to say about all this?

III

Even the most cursory empirical glance cast over Bright's pronouncements and correspondence would appear to corroborate the argument that his attitude towards war was patently 'Cobdenite' and even 'pacificist'. This section considers the evidence that has long provided ammunition for this argument, before challenging its ostensible irrefutability by evaluating it against overlooked sources suggesting that the opposite held true. Demonstrating that Bright stood firmly on the Quaker peace testimony, the section offers a crucial corrective to the historiography.

It is true that, time and again, Bright refused to discuss the 'abstract' principle. His intervention in the Commons debate on the queen's message shortly after Britain's declaration of war against Russia in 1854 is a case in point. Cautiously sidestepping the question of the justice of the war because 'every war undertaken since the days of Nimrod has been declared to be just by those in favour of it', Bright announced that he would 'not discuss ... the abstract principle of peace at all price, as it is termed, which is held by a small minority of persons in this country [i.e., Quakers and other pacifists], founded on religious opinions which are not generally received', but debate the war 'entirely on principles which are held unanimously by all the Members of this House'.[125] He later exposed Palmerston's ploy of delegitimising his arguments: 'It is very easy for the noble Lord the Member for Tiverton [i.e., Palmerston] to rise and say, that I am against war under all circumstances ... and that my opinion on this question is not to be taken either by Parliament or the country'.[126] Bright accordingly presented himself as someone 'not afraid of discussing the war with the noble Lord on his own principles', emphasising that he '[understood] the blue books as well as [Palmerston]'.[127] Such a pre-emptive move reflected Cobden's tactic of striking down his critics' straw-man arguments which persistently misrepresented his views.

Outside parliament, Bright also based his opposition to the war on diplomatic and 'blue-book' arguments. This approach fell in line with Cobden's view 'that nobody, not even the Quakers themselves, desire to see the non-resistance principle carried before the public as a practical political measure'.[128] From the public platform, Bright focused on denouncing orthodox foreign policy, reproaching his compatriots' pugnacious spirit, ridiculing alarmist views about the apparent threat Russia posed to European

125. *Hansard*, 31 Mar. 1854, vol. 132, col. 244.
126. *Hansard*, 22 Dec. 1854, vol. 136, col. 892.
127. Ibid.
128. Richard Cobden to G.W. Anstie (17 Aug. 1853), *The Letters of Richard Cobden Online* (Leeds Beckett University et al.), available via https://www.cobdenletters.org (accessed 7 May 2026).

liberties and civilisation, and positing that Britain's interests were antithetical to quixotic interventions in the affairs of other states.[129] In his famous letter of 29 October 1854 to his constituent Absalom Watkin, Bright criticised the British government's reckless diplomatic manoeuvres prior to the outbreak of the war, while also arguing that the claim that Britain was fighting for freedom and civilisation and to stave off Russian despotic aggression was hypocritical given her allies in this war: the French emperor Napoleon III and the Ottoman sultan.[130] Earlier that year, Bright had penned a long letter to Lord Aberdeen pleading with him to preserve peace, and grounding his arguments primarily in diplomatic and utilitarian principles.[131]

Bright explained his pragmatic opposition to the war a year after its conclusion in an illuminating letter to the Birmingham Quaker Joseph Sturge, soon-to-be president of the Peace Society:

> I have never advocated the extreme peace principle, the non-resistance principle in public, or in private—I don't know whether I could logically maintain it. I opposed the late war, as contrary to the national interests, & the principles professed & avowed by the nation—& on no other ground. It was because my arguments could not be met that I was charged with being for 'peace at any price'—& by this our opposition to the war was much damaged.[132]

On the surface, Bright's blatant admission about his apparent non-pacifist leanings seems to provide unassailable evidence attesting to the argument of most scholars regarding his peace principles. These scholars, however, tend to overlook certain important points. First, Bright had nothing to gain by disclosing his real views to an uncompromising and outspoken pacifist such as Sturge. Secondly, Bright's sensitiveness to his critics' frequent misrepresentation of his views often led him, in common with Cobden, to be on the defensive and to walk carefully down the perilous path of the peace-or-war debate. Thirdly, when Bright sent this letter to Sturge in late September 1857 during the Indian uprising, he also suggested that the British government must act to prevent the slaughter of every Englishman in India. But there are certain nuances here. As Miles Taylor has noted, Bright was censorious of Britain's 'folly and misrule' which led to the uprising.[133] Moreover, Bright's apparent support of a military response for the restoration of order in India ought to be considered alongside his later refusal to become secretary of state for India, when Gladstone offered him the position in December 1868, not only because it was 'a burdensome office', but also because it was 'one associated with the

129. For example, *Manchester Examiner and Times*, 25 Jan. 1854, p. 8; *Berkshire Chronicle*, 27 Jan. 1855, p. 6; *The Times*, 8 Mar. 1855, p. 8; *Morning Chronicle*, 18 Dec. 1855, p. 6.
130. Absalom Watkin, *Absalom Watkin: Extracts from his Journal, 1814–1856*, ed. A.E. Watkin (London, [1920]), pp. 312–20.
131. BL, Aberdeen Papers Vol. CCXIV, Add. MS 43252, fos 234r–241v, Bright to Aberdeen, 16 Mar. 1854.
132. BL, Sturge Papers Vol. II, Add. MS 43723, fos 85v–86r, Bright to Sturge, 24 Sept. 1857.
133. M. Taylor, 'Bright, John (1811–1889)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [hereafter *ODNB*].

military establishment'.[134] Bright lamented the events in India, and by no means indulged in the bellicosity of many of his compatriots. Crucially, the statement made in his address to the Birmingham electors that 'to restore order to India is mercy to India' was echoed and endorsed by the London-published Quaker periodical, *The Friend*. Its editorial of September 1857 declared that 'while, in mercy to India, order must be restored to India, it is that a just, wise and merciful government may be established, under which the millions of Hindostan may repose in security, and grow in all that constitutes national strength, prosperity and happiness'.[135] Bright's view thus did not mark an aberration in the context of Quaker responses to the Indian uprising. Finally, Bright's confession to Sturge that he never advocated the non-resistance principle either in public or private should not be taken at face value, given that on many occasions he not only wholeheartedly endorsed Dymond's pacifist works, but also alluded to the Quaker peace testimony in some of his speeches, as we will see.

Adding grist to the mill of those scholars who have argued that Bright was not a pacifist is the fact that he championed through his speeches and transatlantic correspondence the cause of the United States against the Confederacy during the American Civil War. Hesitant at first to intervene, Bright decided to speak out in the light of the Lancashire Cotton Famine and the threat of war between Britain and the United States as a result of the *Trent* affair of 1861.[136] Bright, according to Simon James Morgan, 'became a genuine American hero for his steadfast defence of the Union cause'.[137] Abraham Lincoln and other Unionist politicians greatly admired him. His image hung on the wall of Lincoln's White House office, and a marble bust of him arrived there in June 1866.[138] Such was the impact of his words that, following Lincoln's assassination, a letter from Bright to the editor of the *New-York Tribune* recommending Lincoln's re-election was found in the president's wallet after his pockets were searched.[139] Bright's speeches considered the war on principles acknowledged by everyone. 'Now no one will expect that I should stand forward as the advocate of war, or as the defender of that great sum of crimes which is involved in war', he stated on 4 December 1861 to an audience at Rochdale; '[b]ut when we are discussing a question of this nature, it is only fair that we should discuss it upon principles which are acknowledged not only in the country where the strife is being carried on, but are universally

134. Ibid.
135. *The Friend: A Monthly Journal*, xv, no. 177 (Ninth Month, 1857), pp. 162–3.
136. Taylor, 'Bright, John'.
137. S.J. Morgan, *Celebrities, Heroes and Champions: Popular Politicians in the Age of Reform, 1810–67* (Manchester, 2021), p. 224. See also S.J. Morgan, 'John Bright in Anglo-American Relations: Why an English Radical Became an American Hero', *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, xxiii (2025), pp. 67–90.
138. L.L. Stevenson, *Lincoln in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, 2015), pp. 128–9, 133.
139. Ibid., p. 133.

acknowledged in this country'.[140] It is important to recognise, however, that Bright did not advocate the war *per se*. At the London Tavern on 16 June 1863, Bright was once again unequivocal that '[he spoke] not in justification of war'.[141] He was rather more concerned with other issues at stake: the 'disaster and confusion' that would result to the American continent from the breaking up of the United States; the potential erosion of American democracy; the preservation of universal human freedoms against Southern assault; and the necessity of abolishing slavery, 'the most odious and most intolerable offence against man and against Heaven'.[142] Around two decades after the end of the war, Bright confessed to an American correspondent that '[he] lamented the conflict; but [he] wished that England should offer her sympathy on the side of freedom to the slave, and in favour of the perpetual union of [their] great Republic'.[143] Shannon Westwood is thus correct in arguing that Bright did not 'actively [support] the conflict itself', and his avoidance of doing so seems to have been due to his pacifism, which 'stemm[ed] from his Quaker roots'.[144] It is also important to note that, in common with the Indian uprising of 1857, the American Civil War pertained to the *internal* affairs of a state, as Peter Brock has noted. However, in common with his co-religionists, Bright remained unwavering in his condemnation of war as an '"unlawful" means of settling international disputes'.[145]

It is also true that Bright's views were often permeated by a Manchester School reformist philosophy which posited a direct link between free trade and peace.[146] His speeches and public letters demonstrated his commitment to the Cobdenite idea that free trade was 'the International Law of the Almighty', weaving a web of reciprocal relations between nations and thus making the resort to war seem a less viable option.[147] At the same time, Bright continued emphatically to deny that he ever considered the non-resistance principle as a serious basis for foreign policy. A letter published in the *Spectator* of September 1882 during the war in Egypt made this clear:

> The *Spectator* and other supporters of this war answer me, by saying that I oppose the war because I condemn all war. The same thing was said during the Crimean war. I have not opposed any war on the ground that all war is

140. John Bright, *Speeches of John Bright, M.P. on the American Question*, ed. Frank Moore (Boston, MA, 1865), p. 36.
141. Ibid., p. 199.
142. Ibid., *passim* and esp. p. 264.
143. John Bright, *The Public Letters of the Right Hon. John Bright, M.P.*, ed. H.J. Leech (London, 1885), p. 295.
144. S. Westwood, 'John Bright and his Relationship with the Union during the American Civil War', *Journal of Liberal History*, no. 114 (Spring 2022), pp. 23–31, at 23.
145. Brock, *Pacifism in Europe to 1914*, pp. 354–5.
146. See, for example, Bright, *Public Letters*, ed. Leech, pp. 194, 208, 216–18.
147. [Louis Mallet], 'The Political Writings of Richard Cobden', *North British Review*, xlvi, no. 91 (1867), p. 86. On free trade in nineteenth-century Britain, see A. Howe, *Free Trade and Liberal England, 1846–1946* (Oxford, 1997).

> unlawful and immoral. I have never expressed such an opinion. I have discussed these questions of war—Chinese, Crimean, Afghan, Zulu, Egyptian—on grounds common to and admitted by all thoughtful men, and have condemned them, with arguments which, I believe, have never been answered. I will not discuss the abstract question.[148]

The following year, at a banquet in Birmingham Town Hall, Bright affirmed that he never claimed 'that war in the present circumstances of the world can be escaped'.[149] At the Westminster Meeting-House in February 1887, he bluntly stated that '[he] [had] never troubled [himself] very much about that abstract principle', refusing once again to discuss it.[150]

Even if Bright often avoided addressing the question of war from an absolutist standpoint, on several occasions he found it impossible to quell his pacifist convictions. One of his speeches at the Manchester Peace Conference in 1852 is revealing. Following in Cobden's footsteps, Bright announced to the audience his assumption of 'the character of a practical man', before suggesting that his personal convictions would have no bearing on his pragmatic consideration of the question of war:

> I shall not read the Sermon on the Mount to men who do not acknowledge its authority, nor shall I insist upon *my* reading of the New Testament to men who take a different view of it; nor shall I ask the members of a church whose articles especially justify the bearing of arms [i.e., the 37th Article of the Church of England] to join in any movement which shall be founded upon what are called abstract Christian peace doctrines.

Instead, Bright chose to

> argue this question on the ground which our opponents admit, which, not professing Christians only, but Mahomedans and heathens, and every man of intelligence and common sense and common humanity will admit,—I will argue it upon this ground, that war is probably the greatest of all human calamities—that expenditure, in itself, by a Government, of the resources of the people over whom it rules is an evil; and that peace is the soil upon which industry, morality, intelligence, and civilization, all prosper[.][151]

This excerpt is full of significance. Eschewing his denomination's pacifist proselytisation, Bright here intimates that his principles rested on the Beatitudes and the Gospel; these provided the moral and religious underpinnings of Quaker pacifism. As he also makes clear, *his* reading of the New Testament—which is reasonable to assume led to the same irenic conclusions as those reached by his co-religionists—differed from that of others. Yet Bright considers it futile to try and persuade Anglicans to

148. 'Letters to the Editor: Mr. Bright', *The Spectator*, lv, no. 2831 (30 Sept. 1882), p. 1253.
149. *The Times*, 15 June 1883, p. 10.
150. *The Times*, 23 Feb. 1887, p. 10.
151. *Herald of Peace*, new ser., ii, no. 32 (Feb. 1853), p. 182 (emphasis added).

subscribe to 'abstract Christian peace doctrines', given that one of the articles of faith of their Church, the 37th Article, upheld the lawfulness of bearing arms and fighting wars.[152] Accordingly, Bright goes on to address the question of war based on universally acknowledged principles. He therefore distinguishes between his own personal views on war which he did not want to impress upon others, and the practical arguments he deployed in public and political debate.[153]

Bright's Quaker convictions rose to the surface on a number of other occasions. Bright, remarked the chairman to the annual public meeting of the Liverpool Peace Society in 1889, 'took his statesmanship from the Bible'.[154] Writing in 1870, the French statesman Paul-Armand Challemel-Lacour noticed that in Bright's speeches 'we are always conscious of an undercurrent of religious emotion that rises to the surface only at rare intervals as by an involuntary force'.[155] This was the case with many of his speeches, at the heart of which lay a central pacifist tenet: that war and Christianity were utterly irreconcilable. The concluding section of his speech at the Edinburgh Peace Conference in October 1853 alluded to the impact of war on British interests and institutions, before turning to 'higher considerations'. 'You profess to be a Christian nation', he declared; '[w]ithin the limits of this island alone, on every Sabbath ... more than 20,000 temples are thrown open, in which devout men and women assemble that they may worship Him who is the "Prince of Peace"'. 'Is this a reality? or is your Christianity a romance?', he asked, before expressing the hope that the British churches would earnestly work for the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy (Isaiah 2:4) that a time will come when 'nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more'.[156]

Horrified by the proclamation of a day of solemn fast, humiliation and prayer which was observed by established, dissenting and other denominations on 26 April 1854, less than a month after Britain's declaration of war against Russia, Bright noted in his diary that '[h]umiliation is indeed admirably suited to this occasion, for what feeling is more appropriate when we engage in the slaughter of our fellow-men ... [T]he public sentiment is demoralized and Christianity is impeded, and its character tarnished by impieties of this kind'.[157] Reflecting on the public's responses to 'the tidings of blood & vengeance from the East', Bright later expressed his exasperation in private: '[W]hat strange pleasures & excitements for a Christian (?) people!'[158] The question mark next to the word 'Christian'

152. The concluding clause of the Church of England's 37th Article reads: 'It is lawful for Christian men, at the commandment of the Magistrate, to wear weapons, and serve in the wars'.
153. Hirst, *Quakers in Peace and War*, p. 275.
154. *Herald of Peace*, new ser., xxi, no. 477 (May 1889), p. 224.
155. Quoted in Charles Anthony Vince, *John Bright* (London, 1898), p. 13.
156. *Report of the Proceedings*, p. 46.
157. Bright, *Diaries*, ed. Walling, pp. 169–70.
158. MCL, Wilson Papers Vol. 21, GB127.M20/Index/459, unfoliated, Bright to George Wilson, 9 Sept. 1854.

is quite revealing. Bright's views aligned closely with those of his co-religionists. At the Westminster Meeting for worship on 25 February 1855, he noted with contentment that Friends were 'very polite' to him and seem to have regarded him 'as the champion of peace'.[159] His 'Angel of Death' speech two days earlier was saturated with religious imagery signalling Christian pacifist principles which seeped through the holes of his 'Cobdenite' mantle of the 'practical' politician. Sometimes Bright appeared more determined to emphasise the irreconcilability of war and Christianity. Shortly before his 'Angel of Death' speech, he publicly denounced the religious 'war party' and the belligerent disposition of the religious press. 'I should like to know', he asked, 'what affinity there is between the salvation of the soul and the mangling and slaughter of the body?'[160] 'The sounds of blood', he added, resonated in places of worship, 'mingling not unfrequently even with the anthems to the Prince of Peace'.[161] Cobden also reproached professing Christians for proclaiming the lawfulness of war in general, and the justice of the Crimean War in particular, but did so mostly in private.[162] Cobden's instinctual reactions against belligerent Christians possibly stemmed from his youthful pacifism, which he had disavowed in the 1840s. Yet, compared to the cautious Cobden, Bright sometimes seemed more willing publicly to pronounce Christianity's incompatibility with war. Seeking tranquillity abroad following his nervous breakdown in early 1856, Bright found himself with his daughter in Nice. There they received an invitation for an interview on 13 January 1857 with Empress Alexandra Feodorovna, widow of Nicholas I. The Empress believed that Bright was 'a distinguished Englishman' who 'had been just to them and to Russia'.[163] On that day, Bright confessed to the Empress that he 'had opposed the war in the interest of England and of truth, as well as in that of Russia'.[164] The conversation then led Bright to explain 'that the Friends were against war'.[165] Though frustratingly laconic, Bright's diary entry implies his pacifist convictions.

Bright proclaimed the unchristian nature of war throughout his life. At St George's Hall, Llandudno in November 1876 during the Eastern crisis, he protested against the failure of established and dissenting clergy to instil into people the doctrines of the religion of the 'Prince of Peace'.[166] In front of another audience in Manchester's Free Trade Hall two years

159. UCL, MS OGDEN/65 (2), Bright Letters, unfoliated, Bright to M.E. Leatham, 25 Feb. 1855.
160. *Berkshire Chronicle*, 27 Jan. 1855, p. 6.
161. Ibid.
162. For example, BL, Sturge Papers Vol. I, Add. MS 43722, fo. 23v, Cobden to Sturge, 24 Apr. 1854; fos 34v–35r, 26 Dec. 1854; BL, Cobden Papers Vol. XI, Add. MS 43657, fos 234v–235v, Cobden to Richard, 16 Oct. 1854.
163. Bright, *Diaries*, ed. Walling, p. 210.
164. Ibid., p. 216.
165. Ibid.
166. *Northern Echo*, 23 Nov. 1876, p. 3.

later, Bright declared that they should all 'get rid of [their] Christianity, or get rid of [their] tendency and willingness to go to war'.[167] The two could never co-exist. Around the same time, he reminded attendees at the annual Sunday School Conference at Rochdale of their duty to teach children the pacific code of Christianity.[168] Years later, he castigated the clergy for not speaking out against the Egyptian war.[169] Bright also took issue with the Church of England's 37th Article, which asserts the lawfulness of bearing arms and fighting wars. Indeed, the Article, which can be found recorded in his unpublished private notes, seems to have been constantly on his mind.[170] Other pacifists expended much energy in challenging it,[171] but Bright never reached the level of sophistication of their rebuttals. When he met the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of Peterborough on 30 April 1887, he merely told them that this Article, along with two other Articles, had been inserted 'by politicians and statesmen, and not by good bishops or pious men'.[172] The following year he reiterated this argument to an Anglican minister. 'These Articles to which I am objecting have nothing to do with religious belief. They were introduced only for political purposes, and, in my view, they have for 300 years done much to pervert the minds of our people'.[173] Bright's conviction about the irreconcilability of war and Christianity was also reflected in his rejection of the incongruous idea of the 'Christian soldier' which found its apotheosis in Major-General Charles Gordon (1833–1885), the 'martyr of Khartoum'. 'The war spirit which reigned supreme in Gordon', Bright wrote to a correspondent, 'seems to me wholly at variance with the spirit inculcated in the New Testament'.[174]

Bright intimated his pacifist leanings at the Manchester Reform Club in early October 1876. The latest flare-up of the Eastern Question led him to turn to the recent history of the Crimean War. Halfway through his speech he made a telling confession. 'I do not know why I differed from other people so much [during the Crimean War], but sometimes I have thought it happened from the education I had received in the religious sect with which I am connected'.[175] Bright thus pointed to the ultimate source of his principles—the Quaker peace testimony—before contrasting his own denomination's adherence to the irenic truths of the Gospel with the

167. *Manchester Weekly Times*, 4 May 1878, p. 3.
168. Ibid., 20 Apr. 1878, p. 5.
169. [John Bright], *The National Church and National Righteousness: Speech of the Right Hon. John Bright, M.P., at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, May 2nd, 1883* (London, 1883), pp. 8–9.
170. BL, Bright Papers, Add. MS 43392, fo. 82r, England, Ecclesiastical History: Notes by J. Bright for Speeches on Church Affairs, 1851–1883.
171. For example, William Stokes, *Popular Delusions Sanctioned by the Church of England: An Essay* (London, 1876), pp. 41–56.
172. Bright, *Diaries*, ed. Walling, p. 554.
173. *Birmingham Daily Post*, 16 Mar. 1888, p. 4.
174. Quoted in Trevelyan, *Life of John Bright*, p. 436.
175. *Manchester Weekly Times*, 7 Oct. 1876, p. 2.

Church of England's acceptance of the lawfulness of war: 'Our creed … comes pure and direct from the New Testament. We have no 37th Article'.[176]

The most compelling evidence that Bright's principles were ultimately informed by the Quaker peace testimony is found in his approval, promotion and publicisation of the works of one of his denomination's most distinguished pacifist authors: Jonathan Dymond. A few days after Bright's death, a Wesleyan Methodist minister, Hugh Price Hughes, preached a sermon in St James's Hall entitled 'The Secret of John Bright's Career', in which he revealed that the late politician's 'favourite book' was Dymond's *Essays on the Principles of Morality* (1829), the final chapter of which dealt with war. 'There was no book other than the Bible', observed Hughes, 'which John Bright read so carefully and so constantly as Jonathan Dymond's book'.[177] Another clergyman, the evangelical Anglican Charles Bullock, agreed.[178] Hughes and Bullock were quite right, and it is remarkable that Bright's biographers—including the first major one, G.M. Trevelyan, and the latest, Bill Cash—have failed to acknowledge this fact. Nonetheless, Bright's diaries and correspondence are littered with references to Dymond. On 23 June 1855, at the height of the Crimean War, he dined at the house of Lord and Lady Goderich in London's Carlton Gardens, when a conversation with Lady Hobart led him to promise her a copy of Dymond's *Essays* after she confessed that 'she wishe[d] to examine more the arguments against all war'.[179] Bright evidently saw in Dymond's *Essays* a clear exposition of the 'abstract' peace principle. A few weeks later Bright conversed 'with one of Lady Peel's daughters on public morality and military profession, and promised to send her a copy of Dymond's "Essays"'.[180] When in 1879 a correspondent wrote to him to ask his opinion on war, Bright advised him 'not to trouble [himself] with the abstract question', yet at the same time he recommended Dymond's works as 'the best argument against war'.[181] Shortly after resigning from Gladstone's cabinet in 1882, Bright dined with the pacifist Lady Katherine Bannerman, who was 'wholly against war on Christian grounds' and '[could not] understand how men can engage themselves to fight in any case at the command of any man'.[182] Once again, Bright made a promise to send a copy of Dymond's 'Essays'.[183] In July 1885 Bright noted in his

176. Ibid.
177. Hugh Price Hughes, *The Philanthropy of God: Described and Illustrated in a Series of Sermons* (London, 1890), pp. 47–8. Bright's daughter, Mary B. Curry, included extracts from Dymond's works in a book in which she compiled passages of prose and poetry associated with her father: *A Book of Thoughts, in Loving Memory of John Bright* (2nd edn, London, 1897), pp. 37, 118, 235, 311.
178. Charles Bullock, *John Bright: A Non-Political Sketch of a Good Man's Life* (London, 1889), p. 34.
179. UCL, MS OGDEN/65 (2), Bright Letters, unfoliated, Bright to Margaret Elizabeth Leatham, 24 June 1855. As Bright wrote in his diary: 'She can't quite comprehend the whole question of War or Peace—that is, the abstract principle': Bright, *Diaries*, ed. Walling, p. 199.
180. Bright, *Diaries*, ed. Walling, p. 201.
181. Bright, *Public Letters*, ed. Leech, pp. 238–9.
182. Bright, *Diaries*, ed. Walling, p. 488.
183. Ibid.

diary a meeting with T.G. Darton of the Quaker Darton family of publishers, during which they agreed 'to bring out a new edition of Dymond's "Essays on Morality"'.[184] Eager to disseminate Dymond's moral teachings, Bright guaranteed £50 towards publication costs.

Bright unreservedly endorsed Dymond in a reprint of the final chapter of the latter's *Essays*. Entitled *War: Its Causes, Consequences, Lawfulness, etc.*, this short book was published in 1889, the final year of Bright's life. The preface included a few introductory words by Bright including passages from his own speeches revised by himself. At the heart of Dymond's *War* was the pacifist tenet '[t]hat the general character of Christianity is wholly incongruous with War, and that its general duties are incompatible with it'.[185] These words are echoed in Bright's preface: 'If we may presume to ask ourselves, what, in the eye of the Supreme Ruler, is the greatest crime which His creatures commit, I think we may almost with certainty conclude that it is the crime of War'.[186] A more revealing point can be found in Bright's opening statement: 'I know of no better book dealing with morals as applied to nations', he announced to readers, 'than Dymond's Essays. As the world becomes more Christian, this book will be more widely read, and the name of its author more revered'.[187] This, once again, showed where his true convictions lay. Regarding the 'abstract' peace principle, Bright told readers of Dymond's work that if they wanted 'to know a book that says a good deal upon it, to study the New Testament', and to make up their own mind.[188] Bright had already made up his.

IV

On the centenary of John Bright's birth in November 1911, the periodical organ of the American Peace Society, *Advocate of Peace*, carried an essay on 'one of the greatest of the world's advocates of peace'.[189] The essay's hagiographical tone and laudatory drift signalled the deep-rooted place Bright occupied in American national memory. Though the essay's author did not directly pose it, the question of the nature of Bright's peace principles, which had mystified his contemporaries and has been engaging the minds of his biographers and historians for more than a century, unavoidably asserted itself. 'No doubt', the author averred, 'Mr. Bright's own view was that of the Society of Friends—that war is a moral wrong under any and all circumstances'.[190] His 'ideal' was to eradicate war, and help

184. Ibid., 529.
185. Dymond, *War*, p. 81.
186. Bright, 'Introductory Words', in Dymond, *War*, p. iv.
187. Ibid., p. iii. Bright made a similar statement in a letter of 1885 to a correspondent, to whom he offered to send Dymond's *Essays: Gloucester Citizen*, 19 Jan. 1885, p. 3.
188. Bright, 'Introductory Words', in Dymond, *War*, p. iii.
189. F.S. Van Eps, 'John Bright, Advocate of Peace', *Advocate of Peace*, lxxiii, no. 11 (Nov. 1911), p. 251.
190. Ibid., p. 252.

inaugurate the morally 'right state' of universal peace.[191] But, according to the author, 'as a matter to be dealt with, an issue to be met, a thing to persuade others who had not his sense of right developed, who cannot at once be brought to the highest ideal, it was necessary to argue from the best common ground on which agreement would be likely to be practically possible'.[192] Yet this 'was not compromise with wrong, but getting as near right as practicable at the time'.[193]

The assessment of the author of the essay in the *Advocate of Peace* was correct, as this article has demonstrated. Challenging the prevalent historiographical assumption that Bright was not a pacifist, this article has argued that the Quaker peace testimony was at the heart of his opposition to war. Conscious that the political arena demanded a pragmatic disposition, upon entering parliament he became fluent in the language of his opponents who, he knew, would not accept the direct applicability of his denomination's abstract and scriptural terms to foreign policy debates. Moreover, the wolfish alacrity of his critics to dismiss him as a sentimental moralist of a utopian disposition often led Bright tactically to deny the ultimate source of his convictions, and to predicate his anti-war stance on highly specific and utilitarian grounds. In this he trod the same prudential path as other contemporary Christian politicians. Still, beneath the ostensibly Cobdenite, 'pacificist' and Manchester School rhetoric that typically saturated his letters and public and parliamentary speeches, lurked Bright's commitment to the Quaker peace testimony. Even Cobden seems to have thought that his friend's peace principles were rooted in Quakerism. As he confided to Lord John Russell following Bright's loss of his parliamentary seat in 1857: 'The Manchester people have used Bright atrociously ... as they knew he was a [Q]uaker when they chose him they had no ground of grievance on account of his peace views'.[194] Though Bright appeared ready to endorse the restoration of domestic order with the use of force on a handful of occasions, he nevertheless remained until the end of his life loyal to his co-religionists' peace principles, cautiously promoting them to curious correspondents and intrigued acquaintances, and sometimes even citing them in his speeches. The Quaker peace testimony's guiding light which vitally shaped his moral approach to life and politics ultimately proved too strong for him to conceal.

In addressing the particular question of the nature of Bright's peace principles, this article has two wider implications. First, war in this period was not merely a question of foreign policy and geopolitics. In a predominantly Christian country such as Victorian Britain where religion

191. Ibid.
192. Ibid.
193. Ibid.
194. BL, Cobden Papers, Vol. XXXI, Add. MS 43677, fo. 55, Copy of a Letter from Cobden to Russell, 3 Apr. 1857.

pervaded all aspects of life, war was frequently conceptualised as a fundamentally religious and moral question. This would continue to be the case well into the twentieth century.[195] Secular interpretative paradigms and the analytical tools of diplomatic and military history can therefore only take us so far in understanding war and its place in nineteenth-century society, politics, culture and mentalities. In demonstrating the centrality of religion in this matter, this article has thus opened up new avenues into the cultural study of war and peace-thinking, while calling for a reconsideration of extant secular interpretations of war and peace in the history of ideas.[196]

The second implication is that religion was at the heart of Victorian political culture. Religion and politics in this period were not—as might be assumed from a twenty-first-century perspective—clearly demarcated, but rather defined by an interpenetrative relationship. Historians have done much over the past decades to uncover the religious and moral dimensions of Victorian political culture, and it is now recognised that a proper understanding of politics in this period is impossible if divorced from a serious consideration of the enlivening and often disruptive influence of religion. In revealing that the basis of Bright's views and policy position on war was his denomination's pacifist principle, this article has shown that religion was the vital component which moulded his political ideas and peace-mindedness. Accordingly, the article's case-study has demonstrated that religious convictions and denominational affiliations mattered in Victorian politics and that they should, therefore, matter to the historian. At the same time the article has revealed the methodological and interpretative challenges in uncovering the link between religious and denominational convictions on the one hand, and policy positions and political actions on the other. The practical exigencies of parliamentary politics meant that the wellspring of a policy position did not always translate straightforwardly into the articulation and advocacy of that policy. It is true that religion typically informed the political actions of Victorian parliamentarians and statesmen, but in an age of increasing pluralism and secularising tendencies, politicians often formulated and defended their policy positions on a more practical basis. This can potentially mislead the historian seeking to understand the interface between religion and Victorian politics, so a careful re-examination of the available evidence, in conjunction with overlooked material, is needed. This has been this article's approach. As it has shown, despite the fact that Bright often denied that his denominational identity had a bearing on his politics and principles of peace, the veneer of his self-fashioned pragmatic disposition

195. See J. Wolffe, *God and Greater Britain: Religion and National Life in Britain and Ireland, 1843–1945* (London, 1994); and S. Parker and T. Lawson, eds, *God and War: The Church of England and Armed Conflict in the Twentieth Century* (Farnham, 2012).

196. For example, C. Duggan, 'Ideas of War and Peace', in G. Claeys, ed, *Encyclopedia of Nineteenth-Century Thought* (London, 2005), pp. 207–12.

remained patchy and translucent, and through it intermittently radiated his visceral Quaker pacifist sensibilities and instinctual conceptualisation of war as a question which only an appeal to the highest spiritual authority—the Bible—could ultimately answer.

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