The Revd John Harris: issues in Anglo-Jewish pacifism, 1914–18*

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John Harris, a minister at Prince’s Road Synagogue in Liverpool, was probably the first person to argue that Jews should have the same rights as Christians to lodge a conscientious objection to military service. Harris was an unassuming and religious man. His pacifism was personal and not political. But he raised questions about Jewish pacifism, Jewish self-censorship and the freedom of the rabbinate, which caused consternation and self-questioning in the community and in the end cost him his job.

So great was the concern that the Chief Rabbi, Dr Joseph Hertz, was obliged to use his influence to have Harris reinstated, and Alfred Jessel KC was brought in to mediate. Jessel was ‘one of earth’s enviable men’,1 an eminent barrister, and Vice-president of the United Synagogue. Above all we are told that he had ‘an absolute genius for resolving serious difficulties into matters of tweedledee and tweedledum’.2 But this was April 1916, when Verdun dominated the headlines and the disruption and carnage of the First World War were exceeding all expectations. The task proved too much even for Jessel. It is innocent enough to claim that British legislation should apply equally to Jew and non-Jew, but in the context of 1916 it brought John Harris’ patriotism into question and posed a severe threat to his congregation.

From the outbreak of war in August 1914, the middle-class youth of Liverpool, as elsewhere, rushed to enlist, including the Jews. There was enormous pressure to volunteer, and young men of any persuasion who refused on principle, must have held strong convictions, either political or religious, in order to do so. At first religious objections were ill defined. In August 1914 not even membership of the Society of Friends was synonymous with pacifism;3 a number of young Quakers volunteered for active service on the grounds that this was a special case. A small nation, Belgium, had been attacked by a militarist power, Germany. Although the principle of Quaker pacifism in all circumstances was quickly reasserted, the debate within the Society of Friends illustrates the difference between refusal to participate in a particular war, and a religious conviction that all war is wrong. Indeed, the differentiation between wars that are commanded, wars that are permitted and wars that are forbidden is central to any Torah-based discussion of Jewish pacifism.

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Not all religious objections were synonymous with pacifism; the Christadelphians were not necessarily opposed to war, but their religion forbade them to obey army orders from non-religious sources. Again one is reminded of certain Hassidic groups that will fight only in an army commanded by the Messiah. Orthodox Judaism was not pacifist, but there were religious objections to Cohanim (descendants of the priestly caste) serving, since it was contrary to the law for them to be in contact with the dead. This problem was conveniently solved by dispensations from the Chief Rabbis on both sides in the conflict. However, it is fair to mention that the Leeds Beth Din publicly opposed the Chief Rabbi on this issue and his dispute with them was in progress at the same time that he was being called on to use his influence in the Liverpool affair.

A more fundamental problem for religious Jews was the lack of Kosher food in the forces or of any provision for strict religious observance. None the less, the number of Jews serving (10,000 in January 1915 out of a total Jewish population of 250,000) does not seem to have constituted a smaller proportion than for the British population as a whole.

During the summer of 1915 there was increasing political pressure to have all eligible men enlist in the army. Under the Derby Scheme a register of available manpower was compiled by a door-to-door canvass. Jews were involved in this (in Manchester for instance) and there was nationally an active Jewish Recruiting Committee. ‘England has been all she could be to Jews; Jews will be all they can be to England’ was used as a rallying cry, and the Psalms were quoted to justify the holiness of a just war. ‘Blessed be the Lord, my Rock, Who teacheth my hands to war and my fingers to fight’ (Psalm 110,54).

On 29 January 1915 the Jewish National Movement in Liverpool held a debate on the issue that compulsory military service was opposed to Jewish ideals; but outside Zionist circles it was widely propagated that pacifism was contrary to the Jewish religion. Herbert Samuel, the Jewish Home Secretary with Liverpool connections, declared that on religious grounds a Jew could not be a conscientious objector. ‘Everything that is Jewish, even the fine Jewish Ideal of Peace… points the finger of scorn, derision and contempt at the Jewish CO.’ Though its original intention was to prevent and curtail hostilities, by 1916 even the Jewish Peace Society was endorsing the righteousness of the Allied cause.

The insatiable military demand for manpower was finally given the force of law in the National Service Act of January 1916, which introduced conscription. Appeals against compulsory military service were to be heard by Appeal Tribunals. Objections on grounds of conscience were supposedly allowed. In British law the principle of conscientious objection had been established not by pacifists but by people who had religious objections to compulsory vaccination against smallpox. So in 1916 tribunals took conscientious objection to mean a religious objection, and some tribunals rejected even this. To prove that an
objection was genuine, it was important for conscientious objectors to obtain a testimonial from a clergyman of their own faith. Certain ‘liberal’ churchmen, including William Temple, while not themselves opposing the war, gave testimonials on behalf of young men personally known to them. Harris’ controversial stand was taken, he claimed, because his colleagues at Prince’s Road (and one suspects elsewhere) were not willing to perform a similar service for their congregants.

In March 1916 the Government issued a directive that the Act exempted from military service those who were already studying for the ministry. One therefore finds Jewish theological students coming before the tribunals, along with those preparing for the Christian priesthood. The archives of the Chief Rabbi show that he was asked by the authorities to substantiate exemption claims from lists of foreign-born Hebrew teachers, most of whom came from yeshivas outside his normal jurisdiction. Evidence of other Jewish conscientious objectors is hard to find. Sometimes British Jews appeared in front of the tribunals to ask for exemption on humane grounds, because they had relatives in the German or Austrian forces, or interned as aliens. A fews COs, Jewish by birth, were international socialists. These men were popularly regarded as archetypal Jewish pacifists, representing the whole. In fact, they had abandoned Judaism, and their Jewish origin was rarely produced to support their claim, although it was used against them in some tribunals by anti-Semitic military representatives. It was easy enough to dismiss Jewish pacifism, as was done at Cardiff, with the jeer that it was Jews who had killed Christ.8

But here and there one sees the isolated case of a young Jew who had the courage to state a religious objection to fighting. Some of these objections were not pacifist, but rested on halachic exemptions: for example, the man who has just married, or who is faint-hearted. (Talking to Hyam Maccoby, whose father was one of these objectors in Sunderland, made the present writer suspect that these objectors were indeed true pacifists, but that they could think of no other authentically Jewish way of presenting a religious objection.)

Jewish cases were frequently misreported in the local press or ridiculed. Isaac Ruben, aged twenty-three, of Bangor, a boot-and-shoe dealer, had his case dismissed on the grounds that he had been a member of the local rifle club.7 A friendly clergyman, Revd John W. Graham of Walton Hall, sent The Jewish World a corrected account of the stand taken by Eliezar Million, a tailor. He appeared before the Salford tribunal claiming that the divine principle was in every man and that one should love all men and should not kill.8 This Jewish universalism, the biblical notion that all men are brothers created in the likeness of God, is explored and enlarged on in the Talmud. It is one of the earliest arguments for Jewish pacifism and has continued to be used up to the present day by American Jews opposed to the war in Vietnam and to nuclear arms.

It was for such pacifists that Harris had volunteered to speak at tribunals. He
taught Hebrew to boys preparing for their Bar Mitzvah, and would have been a natural person to turn to for a reference.9 He argued that it was therefore proper for him, as for any other religious instructor, to testify to the genuine convictions of his former students.

His insistence on this right shows that there were Jewish conscientious objectors connected with the Prince’s Road Synagogue, even though it has so far been impossible to identify more than a handful. Few tribunal records have survived, and Liverpool local newspapers cannot help because the tribunal there initially withheld names of objectors, and heard many conscience cases in camera. The task of ‘uncovering’ Jewish conscientious objectors of British descent is not helped by the wishful thinking at the time, that they simply did not exist. The Chief Rabbi felt unable to make any public statement recognizing a religious basis for Jewish pacifism. On the contrary, a letter from him was in circulation endorsing the war effort. As a result, tribunals, at Stockport for instance, refused to recognize any plea based on Judaism.10 The body of religious pacifist opinion was Christian, and often claimed a distinction between Jesus’ teaching of non-resistance and the earlier Jewish code of retribution. Individual Christian pacifists were not free of anti-Semitism. In the circumstances, some Jewish COs denied that they were Jewish by religion. Other Jews who openly practised their religion in detention would not admit they were pacifists, lest the authorities further hinder their religious observances. The following extract from a prison diary kept by a Christian objector, a courageous young public-school boy from Repton, does much to explain their caution: ‘Billeus is a heavily built chap of unmistakably Jewish features. His conduct too unfortunately looks fishy though I have no doubt about him as the others have. He will not class himself as a C.O. except to us until he is sent to the Jewish battalion at Plymouth…. he has a real pleasure: strict observance of his religious rites and prohibitions—food—going short of food or providing it himself. With phylacteries on wrist and forehead in the morning he stands calmly humming, refusing to budge from his standing place in spite of being bullied once actually by the sergeant of the guard.’11

Anti-foreign feeling was widespread during the early years of this century, and prejudice was constantly reinforced in both the press and popular literature. A surviving pacifist who had Jewish friends recalled that the anti-German feeling of the period was virtually synonymous with anti-Jewish feeling,12 an impression confirmed by press reporting of anti-Semitic racial harassment. Many Jews did indeed come from Germany. But others were from Eastern Europe and from Russia, Britain’s ally in the war. After the sinking of The Lusitania in May 1915, German—i.e. German-Jewish—property was attacked, and shops with German names broken into in violent demonstrations in Liverpool. It is a notable coincidence that one of the businesses which suffered, Kaufmann’s, shared the original name of a Liverpool-Jewish family
with a pacifist son. There was a noticeable delay in preventive action by the police, who were so quick to control Labour or pacifist demonstrations.

Although both the well-meaning Liberal press in Liverpool and the Jewish establishment denied that there was any link between anti-German and anti-Jewish sentiment, Jews who served in the forces knew otherwise. In May 1916 Captain Neville Laski reported to the Board of Deputies that in the army the prevalent view was that all foreigners were Jews.\textsuperscript{13} Not surprisingly, when Jewish chaplains did at last contact serving men they discovered that some had enlisted as C of E.\textsuperscript{14} Rabbi Adler explained that this was in error, but it was more likely a way to avoid anti-Semitism.

Harris' stand epitomizes the dilemma of British Jews. He associated the Synagogue with pacifism: thus he laid it open to the suspicion of pro-German sentiment. The embarrassment of his colleagues and congregation shows that then, as now, assimilated immigrant groups found themselves trapped by their insecure position into being more Roman than the Romans.

It was not the first time that Harris had been in trouble with his congregation for being 'un-British'. In 1898 he had been reprimanded for supporting Herzl and political Zionism. On that occasion Harris wrote demanding that he should have full liberty of action, outside his duties in connection with the synagogue.\textsuperscript{15} On that occasion too he was at odds with the Minister, Friedeburg. Unfortunately for Harris, his Liverpool congregation consisted of those Liverpool Jews who regarded themselves as most British and therefore distanced themselves from Zionism, for in the 1890s even Chief Rabbi Adler was anti-Zionist. As for the Jewish establishment in Liverpool, they had secured their social status, had assimilated without sacrificing their religious identity, and sent their sons to public schools such as Uppingham and Clifton. The last thing they wanted was to give the impression of divided loyalties. They were exclusively British.

In 1874 the Liverpool Old Hebrew Congregation had built a fine new synagogue away from the city centre; 'The finest in England', the Jewish Chronicle called it. According to Kokosalakis' study of the Liverpool Jewish community,\textsuperscript{16} the Old Hebrew Congregation was controlled by an élite of about thirty families, who were free members. Prince's Road was not the depressed Toxteth of today, but a smart residential district close to the parks, where successful businessmen and cotton-brokers had their houses. The congregation adopted progressive, anglicized forms of worship which dissociated them still further from more recent waves of Jewish immigrants,\textsuperscript{17} and from aspirations for a homeland in Palestine.

In 1914 Zionism and pacifism did not necessarily go hand in hand. Zionism's emphasis on international Jewry certainly influenced a section of Jewish opinion. Dr Gaster, the Haham, leader of the Sephardi community, deplored a conflict which set Jew fighting Jew. Yet militant Zionists fought enthusiastically
for the British in Palestine. Jewish recruiting in both the German and the Allied forces was deliberately encouraged by the promise of Jewish self-government in Palestine. The Jewish community contributed willingly to the British war effort and shared the general anti-German hysteria. War-loving German Jews were un-Jewish, declared the Jewish Chronicle in February 1916, the same month that it closed its Roll of Honour for those who had volunteered to fight on the Allied side. It was constantly maintained that anti-Semitism was exclusively German and did not (officially) exist in Britain.

Although at the outbreak of war German Jews were barred from the judiciary, the civil service and university posts, they were an assimilated population and were resolutely included in the German war effort. Israel Cohen returned from Ruhleben and reported that 60,000 Jews were serving in the German army. In America the Jewish press was not anti-German, and there was a marked Jewish element within the peace organizations which opposed entry on the Allied side.

It seemed to many British Jews too that it was Britain's ally, Russia, which was most anti-Semitic. The authorities allowed repeated pogroms to take place both in Russia and in Russian-controlled Poland. The war on the Eastern Front ravaged the Pale of Settlement; and reversals were blamed on the Jews, culminating in mass expulsions and the banning of Hebrew in July 1915. In Russia, Jews were not conscripted on an equal basis with other groups, a sign that they were not full citizens.

As a result, British-born sons of non-naturalized Russian Jews were not conscripted into the British forces under the 1916 Act. This actually created anti-Semitism, because it looked as if Russian Jews were excused service. Even their internment failed to satisfy public opinion, and they were next threatened with deportation to join the Russian forces, an alarming prospect for men who had come to Britain for political asylum. This problem of 'friendly' aliens dragged on and was resolved only by the Russian withdrawal from the war after the Revolution of 1917. Then, in the final wave of recruitment, Jews who had not been able to afford naturalization were enlisted with the promise that for those with proper residence and language qualifications, active service would confer British nationality without a fee after three months.

Enemy aliens were a different matter, and the illogical extremes of their internment sometimes created discrepancies within families. German-born sons of naturalized parents were not eligible to serve in the British forces. But British-born sons of the non-naturalized were. The Liverpool Daily Post records the tribunal appearance of a young man, whose father, born in Germany and living in Liverpool since the age of three, but never naturalized, had been interned. The son, British-born, applied for exemption which was refused. The tribunal also refused to set his father free.

It was not possible for interned Jews to practise their religion, but the Jewish
press was careful not to criticize the government on so sensitive an issue. The Board of Deputies announced that internment was not a Jewish question.20 Revd Harris evidently disagreed. He was involved, along with other Jewish ministers, in visiting internment centres with gifts of Passover Matzos, and pressing for the supply of Kosher food.

The military authorities seemed truly confused by their simultaneous desire to enforce universal conscription and to exclude alien elements from the British forces. The question of whether foreign-born Jews were subject to the National Service Acts, or whether there should be a separate Jewish regiment, was fiercely argued in the Jewish press at the time. It seemed as if the right to enlist was an important element of non-discrimination. This issue, along with radical immigrant opposition to the war, has been much discussed by Jewish historians since.

But John Harris was notably different from the Russian émigré Jews who failed to identify themselves with the war effort. To them he appeared incongruously English. He owned a black dog, so was called 'der reb mit hund'.21 Harris was born in London in 1866, the son of a British minister, Raphael Harris, who had been Hazan at the Bayswater Synagogue. This qualified John to hold a specially endowed Braham Readership at the Liverpool Prince’s Road Synagogue. The post could not be given to Revd Joseph Polack, Minister at Prince’s Road from 1882 to 1896, since he had not been so lucky in his birth.

Harris himself was no outsider to the congregation. His father had been a minister at the synagogue before him, and when Polack’s departure enabled an appointment to be made, Harris became reader in 1894 and later Secretary. Perhaps it was the Englishness of his background and education, together with the apparent security of his appointment, that gave Harris the confidence to speak out against conscription in much the same terms as any other Englishman.

His superior, the Minister of the Synagogue, Revd Samuel Friedeburg, had a different interpretation of Englishness. He was ‘a keen advocate of patriotic service, and [has] continually urged young men to join the army and has held special military services at the Synagogue’.22 He was Honorary Chaplain to Jewish soldiers serving in the area and was photographed with them.23 The synagogue was therefore closely identified with the war effort. In 1916 the crux of the matter was that Friedeburg had refused a tribunal testimonial to a pacifist. The pacifist, H. Endbinder, a draper from Ellesmere Port on the other side of the Mersey, was an ex-member of his congregation, and a fellow Freemason. When taken to task for this by the Jewish Chronicle, Friedeburg justified his refusal by explaining that although he knew Endbinder, he had no knowledge at all of his pacifist views and was therefore not in a position to testify on his behalf or on behalf of any pacifist who applied to him.24 Endbinder
had to turn instead for a character reference to a Christian clergyman, Revd
Arthur Price, and this was what offended John Harris.

'It is because respect has been denied to the Jewish Conscientious Objector,'
he wrote to *The Jewish World* on 22 March 1916, 'that I have entered this
controversy. In the opinion of the Conscientious Objector, Jewish or otherwise,
and in my own opinion, all war is wrong. My reading of my religion does not
prevent me from holding that view. It strengthens me therein. I would not
suggest for one moment that it is the view of the majority of English Jews. None
the less, as a Jewish Minister, I claim my right of perfect freedom to hold and
express my conscientious convictions and to assist those who hold similar
convictions.'

Yet Harris' attempt to provide Jewish testimony for Jewish objectors was
blocked. An 'official' of the synagogue ignored the convention of keeping
differences of opinion within the community by giving an interview to the
non-Jewish press. *The Liverpool Express* on 11 March reported that Harris was a
conscientious objector and had 'shown sympathy with men who sought to
escape military service on these grounds'. The committee had therefore decided
to dismiss the minister. They stated that they had no objection to Harris' holding a conscientious objection himself. They took exception to his using his
position as a Jewish minister to appear before tribunals and lay it down as a
Jewish doctrine that it was wrong to take up arms in support of the country. It is
interesting that the synagogue committee could not accept Harris' argument
that young Jews needed testimony from a minister of their own religion.

It is ironic that while Temple thought it impossible for clergy in the
Established Church to oppose the war—as Harris had done and was apparently
permitted to do—they did testify before tribunals by virtue of their office. Gore,
the liberal Bishop of Oxford, used his position both to give written testimony on
behalf of objectors and to mount public campaigns against their ill-treatment by
the military and by tribunals. Harris' protest brought a noticeable shift of
emphasis within the Jewish press. *The Jewish World* suggested that, by refusing
character references, Friedeburg was impeding the work of the tribunals set up
by Parliament.25 The *Jewish Chronicle* wondered how it could be an offence for a
Jew to do what the government had recognized.26 'It seems that only a gentile is
allowed to have a conscience', wrote L. Bennett from Liverpool. 'Is a Jew
supposed to be without one?'27 Encouraged by sympathy in London, sixty-two
members and seat holders met the Senior Warden, Mr A.M. Jackson, on 5 April
to support Harris. The affair had split the community and was becoming
embarrassingly public. Behind the scenes, senior members of the Conference of
Jewish Ministers were unhappy to see a minister's freedom of action so
circumscribed by his congregation, and were pressing Dr Hertz to intervene. Mr
Jessel stepped in as a peacemaker.

Thanks to the mediation of Mr Jessel, on Sunday 9 April the sub-committee
of the synagogue, which would elsewhere be called the executive, met Harris and a lawyer friend, Price. The negotiations appeared to succeed and the dismissal was withdrawn. In return Harris undertook not to use his official position to preach pacifism or to vouch for conscientious objectors. Friedeburg regarded this as total withdrawal. However, as Harris saw it, he had agreed only that pacifism was not the view of the governing body or of the majority of the congregation; and he agreed not to appear before tribunals because he had been persuaded that his doing so would not benefit the COs.

The compromise proved purely cosmetic. Lionel Collins, President of the Congregation and apparently Harris’ main contact, had correctly assessed the situation; the views of the two ministers could not be reconciled and Harris had virtually no support within his own congregation. The sub-committee which reinstated Harris controlled only his post as Braham Reader. His position as Registrar and Secretary was in the hands of the select committee, which would elsewhere be called the council. It met a week later, on Saturday 15 April. Harris was not present, but when the minute books were handed to him as Secretary, he found to his dismay that notes had been added to the sub-committee minutes after he and Price had left the meeting. These notes attributed the ‘extreme unpleasantness’ entirely to Harris’ obstinacy in refusing six weeks earlier to give assurances, which he had now conceded, regarding his attitude to conscientious objectors. Harris was unwilling to accept this partial record of events and he resigned precipitously, much to Jessel’s disapproval. The resignation was accepted by the sub-committee on 19 April. The effect of Jessel’s intervention had been to transform a dismissal into a resignation. The Committee had shifted the onus on to Harris. From outside Liverpool it appeared ungentlemanly and (oddly enough) un-English. The Jewish World remarked that calm and deliberate action seemed incompatible with the very atmosphere of this congregation.

But whatever the official version, it is clear that Harris was doing more than uphold the rights of congregants to a conscientious objection. He was himself a pacifist and was publicly putting the case for Jewish pacifism. On 19 February 1916 he had preached a sermon at Prince’s Road which questioned the basic assumption that the Jewish religion could not be pacifist. When preaching, Harris was careful not to impose his views on his congregation. He acknowledged Elijah’s exploits with fire and sword. None the less, he used the teaching of both Elijah and Elisha to link pacifism with the Jewish tradition. He reinforced his argument with biblical quotations and post-biblical midrash. Again and again, incidentally, he reminds one of the modern Israeli peace movement. He is particularly critical of racial hatred. His sermon is subtitled ‘a plea for tolerance’. It calls for a variety of religious practice within Judaism and for love of one’s fellow men. ‘What strange paradox is this?’ he asks, ‘that makes the Jew the least tolerant of men? Have we not suffered enough because the world would not recognise the sanctity of the human conscience?’

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Up to that time the Jewish press had treated pacifism with scant respect. During April writers began to distinguish between the Jewish religion which did not necessarily justify pacifism, and the individual Jewish conscience which might. The eminent Quaker, Edward Grubb, argued in February that Quaker beliefs on war could equally well be shared by Jews.31

Harris was in touch with British pacifist circles, beleaguered though they were. He received moral support from at least one non-Jewish minister in Liverpool. Stanley Mellor, Minister of Hope Street Church (whose journalist brother William was a prominent socialist CO), wrote to the Jewish Chronicle in support of Harris. Perhaps while visiting internment camps Harris had met members of the Society of Friends. Their Emergency War Victims Relief Committee had been active on behalf of interned aliens and their families. Edward Grubb was National Treasurer of the No-Conscription Fellowship.

The NCF was a self-help anti-conscription organization which offered contact and moral support to conscientious objectors both socialist and religious. It campaigned against the abuse of COs, and was at great pains not to be identified with any pro-German sympathies. Harris’ attempt to organize a separate support organization for Jewish pacifists came to nothing; even his well-wishers recognized that opinion in the community was against them and that it was not politically expedient. However, the NCF included Jewish members, both in Liverpool and elsewhere. Joseph Hoare’s diary mentions a fellow-CO, Bak, a member of Willesden No-Conscription Fellowship, a Jew by birth and by religion. Because The Tribunal, the NCF journal, suggested a mode of defence for Christian COs in front of aggressive tribunals, The Jewish World, tongue in cheek, put forward a set of similar coherent answers for Jews.

But in Liverpool, the NCF was regarded as a subversive organization which coached defendants to out-argue the tribunals. Herbert Samuel, the Home Secretary, accused the NCF of manufacturing conscientious objectors.32 It was said to be no coincidence that five days after Harris attended an NCF meeting, there came the incident of the altered minutes. The Anglo-Jewish community in Liverpool could never accept that the NCF was proper company for a minister. Alderman Cohen said that he would neither call Harris a friend nor attend the synagogue.33

Status within British society was very important for the Jews of the Prince’s Road, but their respect for the élitist structure should not be taken as deference. In Liverpool, as in Manchester,34 the Jews were part of the élitist structure. The community leaders were integrated and identified with the civic leadership. Louis Cohen, founder of Lewis’s Store, had been Lord Mayor in 1899. There were Montagu and Samuel family connections with the peerage. Herbert Samuel had become Home Secretary in the Liberal government largely through defending the passing of the Military Service Act, and it was his task now to enforce conscription (though it was not a party matter since the
majority of Jewish MPs were Conservatives). The tribunals were heavily weighted by the local commercial, political and military leadership, whose support for the war and for conscription dominated the hearings. The Lord Mayor of Liverpool (who annually with the corporation attended a welfare service at Prince’s Road Synagogue) presided over the County Appeal Tribunal for Lancashire. The Anglo-Jewish community was flattered that an important role was played by Major de Rothschild, as Military Representative at the City of London Appeal Tribunal.

Tribunals were supposed to have labour representatives and to reflect the opinion of society at large, but in fact most had no members who were not wholeheartedly in support of the war effort. In the Liverpool area there seem to have been one or two maverick representatives of pacifism, but they were rapidly ousted from office on the grounds that it was not right for a man whose own son was a CO to send other men’s sons to the trenches.

For by this stage in the war people knew that the army was not a path to glory, and was likely to prove a one-way ticket to death. Some of the congregation had already lost relatives in the war. Friedeburg’s own son was approaching military age and was to serve in the following autumn, as George Frampton. (In November 1916 Friedeburg finally followed many members of his congregation and rid himself of his Germanic name.) In all, 113 men from the synagogue served in the war, but Harris’ sons were not among them. Hugh Harris, who had had his eighteenth birthday the previous September, was already a pacifist. He worked for the Friends’ War Victims Relief Committee and was one of twenty-three Jewish pacifists in the Home Office Work Centre on Dartmoor in November 1917. Thirteen men from the congregation died, and it cannot have helped matters that one of the Polack boys, B.J. Polack of the Worcestershire Regiment, then aged twenty-five, was reported killed in Mesopotamia in the week of 21 April, at the time of the fracas about Harris’ pacifism. Tragically, Polack lost another son, Ernest, three months later.

The personal resentments involved were not appreciated by the London Jews who now condemned the Liverpool congregation for dismissing their minister without compensation. The Liverpool congregation did not take kindly to religious direction from the authorities in London. The tensions are clearly revealed by the question of financial provision for Harris and for his family. In May, alongside the appeal for an honorarium for Harris, there was also another (said to have been previously planned) to benefit Friedeburg after twenty-five years of service. On 16 June, a bitter meeting of free members turned down for a second time the proposal to give a grant to Harris. None the less there was a certain sympathy for Harris both inside and outside Liverpool. Gaster, the Haham, a fellow-Zionist, sent a letter of appreciation on 5 June applauding Harris’ conception of the duties incumbent on a Jewish minister in these critical times, and recognizing the wider implications of the affair. ‘We Jews have
obtained our position by our claim for liberty of conscience and it will be safeguarded only so long as this liberty of conscience will be respected by others.’ He and several prominent figures contributed to a fund which was set up to make some provision for Harris. It was never officially endorsed by his synagogue. His furniture was sold for less than he had hoped and he wrote wretchedly to his friends seeking any employment he could find, teaching or secretarial. 18

Although this seemed harsh at the time, there is no evidence that the Jews were harder on Harris than a Christian congregation would have been. Mr Dunn Kaye, a minister of the United Methodist Church, appeared before Walton-on-Thames Tribunal on behalf of his son. He ‘said he had been mobbed in London as a pro-German and had lost his Living’. 19 Yet Harris continued in employment. In 1916 he eventually stepped in as acting-minister at Hammer-smith Synagogue and Headmaster of Poland Street Hebrew and Religious Classes. After the First World War, when rabbis returned from being military chaplains, Harris was from 1919 to 1925 minister of the new Ealing and Acton Associate Synagogue. Thereafter he served from 1926 on the Welfare Committee of the United Synagogue. He was the Honorary Secretary of the Jewish Peace Society, and his son Hugh followed in his footsteps as a campaigning Jewish pacifist.

In 1916 (a letter from Hugh Harris puts the date at 1918) John Harris published Lex Talionis and the Jewish Law of Mercy in support of his beliefs. It is a slim booklet, moderate in tone and hardly likely to cause a stir. Perhaps significantly, it was privately printed for the Jewish Peace Society at the Pelican Press under Francis Meynell, an ardent young Roman Catholic pacifist and moving spirit in the Christian pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation. The peace movement provides a mirror image of the interdenominational cooperation on the military side. There the YMCA worked closely with the Jewish army chaplains, provided facilities for Jewish services and in turn received funds from Jewish contributors. What is interesting about Harris is not that he was an Anglo-Jew, but that Anglo-Jewry was itself split, with a small minority of pacifists reflecting the split in English opinion.

Until 1914 Harris had not been regarded as a marginal Jew. He came of a family respected in the ministry, and one must not be misled by his lack of Rabbinic title, for the Old Hebrew Congregation at Prince’s Road did not have a minister who held a Rabbinical degree until 1949. Harris carried out all the duties of a minister, and since the start of the century he had contributed sermons both signed and unsigned to the Jewish Chronicle. Nor should we picture him as cut off from developments in Jewish thought. At the time of this controversy the Jewish Chronicle published an article by Rabbi Stephen Wise who was at the time still active in the American peace movement. It also published an important extended essay by Mordecai Kaplan, packed with the
reconstructionist ideas that are now famous. Presumably Harris wrote the sort of book he did because American-style Jewish philosophy was inappropriate to the English situation. His book provides a scholarly argument for a pacifist evolution of Jewish law. But it is set out very simply, in the style of other English religious pacifist pamphlets. It is addressed to Jews and Christians alike. He aims to dispel the idea that Christians are natural pacifists and Jews are not. He points out that the Jewish law of an eye for an eye established the principle that a penalty should never exceed the wrong suffered. Over the centuries money values had replaced physical punishment. Fines provided reparation, a substitution reaffirmed by Maimonides. Harris suggests that by the beginning of the Christian Era the Pharisees wished to abrogate even the death penalty for murder. He concludes: ‘Of the loving and humane spirit that underlies Judaism, the evidence is overwhelming’. Unlike some Jewish pacifists, Harris does not claim that this is anything special to the Jewish people or to the covenant. ‘In that it does not claim to be different from other religions. Love is one of the elemental virtues, like honesty or chastity, common to all faiths, and can be exercised by those who are unattached to any of the recognised creeds’. The book is completed by a series of quotations on peace and brotherhood. Again Harris pleads for the love and tolerance of foreigners. There is to be no notion of revenge. He quotes from Deuteronomy xxiii, 7: ‘Thou shalt not abhor an Egyptian because thou wast a stranger in his land’. He argues for something other than nationalism, whether that nationalism be British or Jewish.

If one finds the book somewhat disappointing, coming as it did from a man who had sacrificed his home and livelihood to his beliefs, the clue lies perhaps in his view of the spiritual role of Judaism. In 1902 he had made an unfavourable comparison between the worldliness of his congregation and the spiritual regeneration of Christian chapel-goers in neighbouring Wales. It was not on theoretical grounds that he took his stand but in order to carry out his ministry, testifying for men whose dissent would lead to court martial and prison. He may have underestimated the risks he took. In the words of a sermon he published in 1902, ‘We are not hampered by anti-semitism or persecution, we have outgrown our ghetto prejudices and are free to exercise our religious advantages without let or hindrance’.40 What his uncle, Morris Harris, condemned as an obsession and meddling in politics,41 John Harris saw purely in terms of religion. There is a letter from him in the Jewish Chronicle of 12 May 1916: ‘For my part I am an avowed pacifist. I believe intensely in the paramount duty of returning good for evil, and in the final and certain victory of love and love alone over hatred and prejudice.’

Yet the Anglo-Jewish community in Liverpool felt perhaps justifiably that their own sons were defending British liberties not only against what was generally regarded as German militarism, but against the anti-Semitism which had brought many of their families to England in the first place. Their reluctant
participation in the war was therefore all the more fervent. This is not a case of Jews pretending to be Englishmen. Their loyalty to the Empire was genuine. One is reminded of Michael Marrus' study of the Frenchness of French Jews at the turn of the century. Anglo-Jewry did not have to choose between British nationalism and their Jewish identity, for the two were synonymous. Citizenship of the British Empire conferred the additional privilege of being a British Jew. Grateful for Englishness, they found themselves committed to a perhaps excessive constitutional conformity.

The past sixty years have done little to alter the situation. In the United States there has been a Jewish pacifist tradition which has not extended to Britain. The Jewish Peace Society revived in the Twenties, but then the horrors of Hitler made Jewish pacifism almost a contradiction in terms during the Second World War. Like Rabbi Judah Magnes, the American pacifist, John Harris found to his intense regret that he was forced by events to abandon pacifism.

'The cry of the tortured and persecuted victims of the Nazis has been too bitter to deny to them what appears to be the only solution of their sufferings and the only alternative to their extermination', he wrote to Victor Gollancz on 14 June 1943.

Since 1945 the need to defend the state of Israel has meant that Jews have continued to find that pacifism is regarded by their fellows as non-Jewish or even anti-Semitic. Soviet discrimination against Jews has encouraged British Jews to campaign for Soviet Jewry rather than for nuclear disarmament.

Yet I would suggest that Harris did make a difference. As a pacifist, he succeeded in persuading his Christian contacts that Jews could be religious pacifists too. In this country the Fellowship of Reconciliation is still exclusively Christian, but internationally it has become a multi-faith organization. In the United States, France and now in Israel it provides support and affiliation for Jewish religious pacifists, whose pacifism has much in common with that of Harris.

As an English Jew, Harris established a precedent. He dissented from national policy in wartime, both as a Jew and as an Englishman, without being charged under the Defence of the Realm Act, or abandoning his own very English identity.

Finally, as a minister, he forced the community to debate in public and in very British terms some of the major problems of Judaism: how far is a minister bound to reflect the moral views of the congregation which employs him? Should his priority be the safety of the Jewish people, or is it his duty to preach his religion as his conscience dictates?

In the Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv a quotation from Rabbi Salanter reminds me of Harris. 'The Rabbi whose community does not disagree with him is not really a Rabbi, and a Rabbi who fears his community is not really a man.'
The Revd John Harris and Anglo-Jewish pacifism, 1914–18

NOTES

2. Ibid.
11. Diary, J. Hoare, Imperial War Museum.
13. JC, 30 June 1916.
17. In 1915 seven Jewish congregations in Liverpool joined for charitable purposes in a Jewish Communal Council. The two leading synagogues, Hope Street and Prince’s Road, held aloof. In July 1916 Prince’s Road again refused to join the joint fund-raising efforts of the Jewish War Victims Relief Committee.
18. If one takes the population figures for 1910 of 615,000 Jews, this would seem to be a higher proportion of Jews than in the British army, though one should note that not even the German figure is as high as the proportion of Australian Jews who served, perhaps because of the wide-reaching compulsion exercised in Australia.
20. JC, 21 May 1916.
21. Harris family reminiscences.
22. Liverpool Express, 11 March 1916.
24. JC, 3 May 1916.
26. JC, 10 March 1916.
27. JC, 17 March 1916.
29. JC, 28 April 1916.
31. JC, 4 February 1916.
32. Samuel papers.
33. JC, 28 April 1916.
34. B. Williams, The Making of Manchester Jewry 1740–1875 (Manchester UP 1976) points out that Jews were not peripheral in that city.
35. Liverpool Daily Post, 7 March 1916.
36. Letter from J. Abrahams and others, 18 November 1917. Archive of the Chief Rabbi’s Office.
37. See also Hudaly (see n. 15) and Barry A. Kosmin, ‘Localism and Pluralism in British Jewry 1900–80’, Trans JHSE XXVIII (1984).
38. Letter from J. Harris, 26 June 1916.
40. Cutting, Harris papers.
41. Letter, 12 March 1916.