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Practical idealists: the Free Religious Fellowship, the Great War and conscription

In 1911 a small group of progressive Christians established the Free Religious Fellowship under the leadership of Reverend Frederick Sinclaire, a radical, non-conformist minister, formerly of the Unitarian Church, Eastern Hill. The Fellowship was an active part of the broad coalition of groups opposed to World War I in general and to conscription in particular. The records of the Fellowship are located in State Library Victoria's collections along with its journal, *Fellowship*. This article draws on these and other records to tell the story of the fellowship with a particular focus on Sinclaire's contribution to the anti-conscription campaigns of 1916 and 1917.

In the early 20th century, there were few politically or socially progressive church groups like the Free Religious Fellowship in Australia, apart from Charles Strong's Australian Church.¹ The Anglican, Methodist and Presbyterian denominations were firmly established as conservative religious voices. These churches contributed to a range of social reform movements, such as campaigns for temperance and six o'clock closing of public houses, viewing these campaigns as vital to the spiritual renewal of the nation. In this context, the Free Religious Fellowship was an unusual and unconventional voice of faith and reason.

Frederick Sinclaire was born in New Zealand in 1881 to farmer parents who had migrated from Ireland. Sinclaire won scholarships to Auckland Grammar and Auckland University and subsequently trained for ministry in

the Unitarian Church at Manchester College, Oxford, inspired by the New Zealand Unitarian minister, Reverend William Jellie.² At Oxford, Sinclaire graduated with first-class honours and developed his socialist world view.

Reverend Sinclaire arrived in Melbourne in 1908 to take up his first ministry at the Unitarian Church at Eastern Hill. Sinclaire belonged to the Unitarian tradition that regards individual religious belief as sacrosanct and in which each congregation encompasses a diverse range of beliefs. He soon won the admiration of an intriguing array of Melbourne's artists and intellectuals, attracted by his charisma and his progressive and occasionally unconventional views. Among Sinclaire's early supporters were Bernard O'Dowd, Richard Long, Vance and Nettie Palmer, Eleanor Moore, Frederick Eggleston, and Maurice and Doris Blackburn, many of whom later became founding members of the Free Religious Fellowship.³

While respect for diversity of views was a key feature of the Unitarian Church, Sinclaire's unconventional public activities alarmed members of his congregation, some of whom, while theologically liberal, were politically and socially conservative.⁴ Sinclaire was uncompromising and pugnacious and could be tactless in public debates, especially with other clergy. Religious leaders, such as Methodist ministers Dr William Henry Fitchett and William Henry Judkins, ridiculed him in the pages of Melbourne newspapers. On social issues, such as crime and sexual immorality, Sinclaire argued that poverty is the cause of every kind of sin. He also sensationally challenged the Victorian Socialist Party's founder, Tom Mann, to a debate on 'Churches and socialism', later becoming the first religious minister to join the Socialist Party and editing the *Socialist* newspaper in 1911. In his book *Dream and Disillusion*, David Walker gave the following description of Sinclaire:

By the standard of the day he had none of the hostility to life's pleasures either in his own life or in other people's which discredited so many of his colleagues. He believed that social responsibility was not incompatible with warmth or enthusiasm. For Sinclaire, it was part of his personal mission and religious purpose to combat boredom, a lack of purpose and deadening routine, particularly in a society in which the religious spirit was often censorious, prurient, conservative and narrowly respectable. He was a man prepared to question the basis of his Christian belief and to broaden his teaching as new or unorthodox truths seemed to require.⁵

By the end of 1910, Sinclaire was no longer enjoying his ministry in the Unitarian Church and resigned in the new year. In November 1911, a group of eight of his supporters, including Gerald Byrne, Maurice Blackburn and

Frederick Eggleston, met at Fraser and Jenkinson printers, Queens Street, Melbourne. Byrne, who became the secretary of the Free Religious Fellowship, later recounted the group's general feeling that 'Mr Sinclaire would be a useful unit in our democracy and that we would help to supply that spiritual leaven necessary to the leaven the materialistic lump'.⁶ About 25 people then attended a public meeting where 'speakers called up glorious visions of the powerful religious organisation with its city temple and prosperous [sic] country branches, which would probably grow from the seed we were sowing'. A committee was elected which offered to pay Sinclaire £2 per week to commence as minister of their proposed fellowship, which he accepted.

The Fellowship soon developed a weekly program of activities that reflected the group's broad cultural and religious interests: two services on Sunday, a literature class or reading circle during the week plus alternating social and administrative meetings on Saturdays. The social Saturday nights reflected the Fellowship's broad cultural appetite and included 'impromptu reading of literature, poets, music, dancing and charades'.⁷ The Fellowship also had annual spring festivals, usually at the Sinclaire's own property in Upwey.

Unfortunately, the Fellowship never found a suitable home to provide it with a deep sense of belonging. This quest for lodgings later became a source of much hilarity among members, according to Sinclaire's friend, Winston Rhodes, who reflected in his memoir that establishing the Fellowship with no money, no meeting place and no members was a 'decision [that] must have seemed to an outsider to be harebrained and doomed to failure'.⁸ Sinclaire himself wrote that:

Those who recall our early meetings in attics and cellars, of which each was voted better than its predecessor when perhaps it was only differentiated by a new variety of smells and noises, those who have assisted at our meetings for the discussion of ways means, will not need to have this aspect of the Fellowship forced on their notice.⁹

In August 1914, the Fellowship began to publish a journal entitled *Fellowship: A Monthly Journal of Undogmatic Religion and of Social and Literary Criticism* of which Sinclaire was editor. Initially 150 copies were published, however, by mid-1915, the print run and length of the journal had doubled.¹⁰

It wasn't until February 1915 that the Fellowship published in the journal a 'Statement of Beliefs' outlining their understanding of religion:

the aspiration of the spiritual in man towards fuller communion with God, and the constant effort to live the spiritual life made possible through that



Brass plate made by Reginald Roberts for the Free Religious Fellowship, probably for their main meeting location, Scourfield Chambers, 165 Collins St, Melbourne. Australian Manuscripts Collection MS 15754, MS F BOX 4541/1

communion. It is not therefore a mere intellectual exercise or emotional luxury, but an adventure of the soul among spiritual realities.¹¹

The Fellowship's explicit commitment to freedom of thought mitigated against its ability to develop and promote a coherent world view and way of living that would attract new members. If there was tension between the certainty of a more structured approach and the doubts surrounding a more open approach, the Fellowship erred on the side of the latter. This inhibited its ability to grow and to realise its grand vision. The onset of World War I, however, presented a profound challenge to the Fellowship's beliefs and actions during a time of political and social change.

The outbreak of hostilities in August 1914 reinforced Australia's strong identification as being part of the British Empire, which was partly based on concerns about national defence, and a more strident advocacy of the White Australia policy developed in the early years of Federation. The conflict had near universal support across the nation. Historian FB Smith wrote that Australia, without significant experience in war, was naive and consumed by its desire for a heroic role in history and emancipation from a perceived ignoble past.¹² A combination of such forces led to high enlistment rates and, following news of the landing at Gallipoli, 36,000 young men eagerly enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force in July 1915 alone – although figures never returned to such high levels, as shall be seen later in this article.



The community gathered for the Free Religious Fellowship picnic, pre-World War I. Maurice Blackburn Papers, 1911–71. Australian Manuscripts Collection, MS 11749, Box 51

In the first years of the war, few Australians stood against the tidal wave of patriotism that swept across the nation. Vida Goldstein's Women's Peace Army and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) were some of the few voices that publicly campaigned against the conflict. Among the churches, all leading protestant clergy (such as Dr William Fitchett and Rev. John Rentoul) supported the war and some even insisted that the conflict would cause a revival of religion. Michael McKernan wrote that:

churchmen had synthesised war and Christianity so that support for the war effort became an act of high Christian virtue ... churchmen accepted the war as part of God's providence for the world; through sacrifice, suffering and devotion to duty, men would be renewed, lifted to a higher, more thoroughly Christian plane. Their concern was not primarily for the welfare of the Empire; rather they hoped that war would transform Australian society.¹³

What about the Free Religious Fellowship? At its quarterly meeting on 15 August 1914, the Fellowship endorsed the following motion:

That the present war was not a complete expression of the relations between the nations involved and the Fellowship therefore pledges itself to strengthen the forces which are making for better relations between nations.¹⁴

The Fellowship's resolution did not explicitly oppose the war. Rather, the considered view of the Fellowship was to affirm a commitment to building international understanding by advocating a religion 'whose roots lie hidden in man's nature'. Such belief in kindling the inherent but dormant spiritual life in humankind reflected the idealism of the Fellowship.

Gerald Byrne recounted how members of the Fellowship wrestled for weeks with their sincere response to the war and the doctrine of non-resistance. He described the meeting that endorsed the above motion as protracted and rather acrimonious and perhaps that it ended 'an epoch in the history of the Fellowship'.¹⁵

Interestingly, at least four Fellowship members had enlisted by February 1915 and one founding member, Dr Sydney James Campbell, was killed at Gallipoli.¹⁶ Campbell willed £200 (around AU\$23,000 in today's currency) to the Free Religious Fellowship, which was no doubt gratefully received given that money was always tight.¹⁷

The war was both a disruptive and galvanising event for the Fellowship, providing a point of focus that compelled its members to clarify their values and beliefs. Fellowship members struggled with an emerging and awkward juxtaposition: a longstanding opposition to the excesses of patriotism and capitalism that they saw as the roots of war while responding with compassion to the human suffering and tragedy of the conflict.

Addressing the question of revival of religion in *Fellowship* in September 1915, Sinclaire opined that any worthy revival in religion 'must carry with it the same austere faithfulness to truth which is the boast of the scholar and the scientist, and its social and humanitarian ideals must not be inferior in depth and purity, to the best that are offered in the name of secular movements'. Sinclaire challenged the assumption made by some ministers that the increased communal displays of religious devotion and loyalty aroused by the war led to an increase in genuine religious belief. Certainly not religion as understood by Sinclaire.

The Australian Peace Alliance (APA), a national coalition of anti-war groups was established in October 1914. This group comprised secular and religious pacifist organisations and, not surprisingly, the Free Religious Fellowship joined as a founding member. The Fellowship was represented by Frederick Sinclaire along with Maurice Blackburn, Marion Agnew and Gerald Byrne. The APA, as it became known, made a telling contribution to the anti-conscription cause in the later years of the war.

The APA marked the end of 1915 with a religious service at Yarra Bank titled 'On Earth Peace Goodwill Toward Men'. Frederick Sinclaire conducted

the service with carols and hymns sung by the Free Religious Fellowship and the Children's Peace Army.¹⁸

As the war dragged on, voluntary enlistments continued to fall. In response, the federal government conducted a survey of potential recruits under the newly passed *War Census Act*. This census reported in November 1915 that there were 600,000 males aged 18 to 45 that were fit for duty.¹⁹ The government also implemented extensive recruiting campaigns beginning in late 1915. While enlistments increased over the following summer, they declined again the next year. Soldiers returning to Australia in 1916 arrived home to a different country: the national pride and unity of 1914 and 1915 was now challenged by disillusionment and division. Parts of society began to respond differently to the war, asking questions about the path and price of victory.²⁰

In early 1916, Prime Minister Billy Hughes travelled to England and won the hearts and minds of many there through his stirring speeches and steadfast confidence in victory. Meanwhile, support grew in Australia for the conscription of eligible men into overseas military service. The Universal Service League, a group dedicated to introducing conscription, was established in Melbourne in September 1915, and united politicians, businesspeople and academics in a chorus of support.²¹ Many key church leaders also expressed their support for conscription and, combined with the support of the newspapers, they comprised a powerful lobbying force. Hughes returned from overseas in July 1916 as a hero by which time the Universal Service League had set out a platform for conscription in Australia. On 30 August, Hughes announced that a conscription referendum would occur on Saturday 28 October, which set a fierce eight-week campaign in motion.

In September 1916, members of the Free Religious Fellowship debated an anti-conscription motion, but it was withdrawn in recognition that conscription was an individual matter and it was not appropriate for the Fellowship to adopt an official position.²² The forthcoming referendum, however, galvanised the Fellowship into action. Anti-conscription groups mobilised under the auspices of the APA, and the newly established United Peace and Free Speech Committee, faced an emerging challenge from Melbourne City Council. From late 1915 onwards, the council refused them permission to use city theatres and halls for their meetings, so they often met at smaller venues or at Yarra Bank. The first major rally organised by the United Peace and Free Speech Committee was held there on 30 January 1916. Many affiliated groups were invited, and speakers stood for about two hours in constant rain to address a modest crowd.

Two anti-conscription demonstrations were held at Yarra Bank on 12 and 26 March, and these were attended by several thousand people. These rallies ended in chaos as they were disrupted by supporters of conscription and returned soldiers. Melbourne quickly became the centre of anti-war activity in Australia and intense animosity developed over conscription, particularly with federal parliament based in the Victoria at this time.

Writing later, Frederick Sinclaire recounted with some pride that he spoke at the 1916 Yarra Bank demonstrations.²³ He was probably the only minister to brave Speakers' Forum to exhort peace from beyond the pulpit during the war. Sinclaire had the appearance of a man whose time had come, convinced as he was of the righteousness of his cause. We can draw on Bertha Walker's description of Sinclaire at this time: 'he did not wear clerical garb but wore black clothes; this, with his pale complexion and reddish hair, made an impressive figure'.²⁴ Winston Rhodes described Sinclaire as 'a quiet and dignified speaker whose resonant voice required no oratorical flourishes or awkward gesticulations to reinforce the logic of his argument, and whose sincerity was illuminated by flashes of wit'.²⁵

In addition to attending these demonstrations, the antis, including the Australian Peace Alliance, wrote, printed and distributed leaflets and posters. Members of the Free Religious Fellowship were heavily involved in these activities and supported a Speaker's Class to help its members develop debating skills and better understand issues surrounding compulsory enlistment and the war. The Fellowship published a song for the APA called *Onward Anti-Conscripts*:

Onward Anti Conscripts
 On our cause to fight;
 Onward we are going,
 On with all our might.
 God is always with us
 In our righteous cause.
 Anti Conscripts never yield
 To the Conscripts Laws.²⁶

In October 1916, as the day of the referendum approached, the pro and anti campaigns intensified. As we have seen, many protestant clergy declared their support for conscription in the churches and beyond. Frederick Sinclaire presided at a debate between Reverend Wyndham Heathcote, a staunch supporter of conscription, and socialist Adela Pankhurst at the Guild Hall.

The referendum was narrowly defeated with 1,087,557 in favour and



Rev. Frederick Sinclaire and Esther Sinclaire's passport photos from the 1930s. Free Religious Fellowship, 'Records and Clippings', Australian Manuscripts Collection, MS 11878

1,160,033 against. Victoria, Western Australia and Tasmania all voted Yes with the other three states voting No and, thus, there was an insufficient majority to support the introduction of compulsory military service overseas in Australia. The following month, Sinclaire reflected on the conscription campaign in an important article called 'The two Australias' in which he attacked the leaders of the Yes vote. He viewed the politicians, professors and publicists as being ignorant and out of touch with the Australian people. By contrast, he saw that the defeat of the referendum 'proved that I was much more closely in touch with vital elements in the life of Australia than any of my critics'. With characteristic zeal he continued:

Never in my life, I believe, have I used to better purpose the intelligence and goodwill which [his readers] are pleased to credit me. Never in my life have I been surer of being on the right side ... I found ministers of religion attempting to use the authority of Christ in order to abet what every day proved more and more clearly to be a conspiracy against truth and freedom. I should be ashamed if I had remained silent.

Sinclaire also reflected with pride on his experience on the stump at Yarra Bank:

One of the advantages that I have over most of my critics consists of a wider experience of humanity. I am one of the few clergymen who have spoken frequently at Yarra Bank and I am one of the few Yarra Bank orators who have occasional access to the haunts of middle class culture. Without hesitation I say that the Yarra Bank crowd is more rational, more humane, more accessible to ideas than any body of University man I have ever met.²⁷

On Saturday 9 December, some 1500 antis assembled at Studley Park for a celebratory demonstration and picnic that included speeches from notable anti-conscriptionists.²⁸ Following the defeat of the first conscription referendum, the *Fellowship* published Doris Blackburn's poem *Peace talk!*:

And dare we talk of peace when wars are raging?
 When rivers run with blood in Honour's cause?
 ('Honour,' they told me!)
 When men forge chains upon themselves for freedom?
 And children starve, and stricken women groan?
 Dare we talk peace? They say wars are righteous.
 Righteous!
 Then all the world of reason is o'erthrown!
 Dare we talk peace?
 Dare we talk peace? Yes! talk, and sing, and shout it!
 Thunder it, mighty oceans, on your shores!
 Breathe it through all the world, oh winds of heaven!
 God give us peace, yea, peace in Honour's cause!²⁹

By 1917 conscription had been introduced in Great Britain, New Zealand, the United States and Canada. As the demand for more Australian enlistments continued, Prime Minister Hughes announced on 7 November that a second referendum would be held just before Christmas. Frederick Sinclaire organised and spoke at an anti-conscription meeting on Monday 19 November at the Guild Hall. The *Labor Call* reports that Sinclaire told the audience that he was in this fight to a finish, arguing that liberty was at stake with the conscription vote.³⁰

This time, the Free Religious Fellowship established an Anti-Conscription Committee to coordinate interested members' contribution to the No campaign. The committee met many times in late 1917 and raised about £190 for the cause, a large amount of which was spent publishing over 200,000 leaflets, including a

manifesto called 'Conscription and Christianity', which was reprinted around Australia. Secretary of the committee, Mr WF Allen regarded it as 'one of the most influential documents published during the campaign'.³¹

The 'Conscription and Christianity' manifesto was signed by nine Protestant ministers, including Frederick Sinclaire. It sets out a dissenting view from the near unanimous support for conscription that was being voiced among established church leaders, and is based on a different understanding of the fundamental principles of Christianity:

We declare that we can conceive of no more amazing or incongruous spectacle than that of ministers of the Prince of Peace advocating often with intemperate zeal, the subordination of the rights of individual conscience to alleged military necessity.

They accused their fellow ministers of abandoning the Christian tradition for a new religion of the state where:

patriotism is the virtue which takes the place of Christian brotherhood, the State replaces God, and the national flag replaces the Cross. Its supreme law is not the law of God but the military safety of the country.³²

Two days before the referendum, Sinclaire and his printers (Fraser and Jenkinson) were convicted at the Melbourne City Court under the *War Precautions Act* for not having submitted 'Conscription referendum questions for voters' to the censor. The magistrate fined Sinclaire £20 and ordered him to pay court costs, all of which were cheerfully paid for by the Fellowship's Anti-Conscription Committee who were honoured by the charges and considered the expenditure worthwhile.

The second referendum was also narrowly defeated. The main difference was that Victoria voted No this time by a narrow margin of less than 3000 votes. The antis then gathered for another celebratory picnic in February 1918, this time at Williamstown beach.³³

Early in 1918, not long after the defeat of the second referendum, Frederick Sinclaire and his printers were again charged under the *War Precautions Act* over the November 1917 issue of *Fellowship*. Sinclaire left blank several sections within this issue where the censor had ordered the deletion of comments on the conscription campaign. The initial case was dismissed in the Melbourne Court of Petty Sessions but the crown solicitor appealed to the Practice Court, where Justice Cussen agreed that Sinclaire had suggested that the alterations were ordered by the censor on the last page of the issue where he wrote 'Vote NO. For the Reasons See Page 51 to 53 Especially the Blank Spaces'.³⁴

In covering the case, the *Labor Call* newspaper stated that ‘as most people know Mr. Sinclaire played a great part in the fight against the conscriptionists, and unlike the clergy as a whole, he is always right there with a word of advice or hearty cheer when the wage-slave is in sore straits. In fact, he preaches Christ and practises what he preaches’.³⁵

When considering the conscription debates more broadly, we can see how the position of the Fellowship contrasted starkly with that of the established churches. Historian Alan Gilbert argued that the main Protestant churches support for conscription ‘exalted pro-conscription to the rank of sacred obligation, and sought to justify it in theological terms’.³⁶ The view of the Fellowship could not be more different due to its commitment to individual freedom of thought and religion. The Fellowship, however, faced a profound challenge to disentangle the sacred from the secular, particularly due to its limited influence on public debate except as part of the broader anti-conscription coalition, which did not view the debate in theological terms.

Until 1917, when Daniel Mannix became the new Catholic archbishop of Melbourne, the Free Religious Fellowship was a lonely church voice against conscription. Nonetheless, the Fellowship pursued its campaigns with diligence and conviction, providing a different, theological perspective on the conscription debate. This view complemented those of the Labor Party, unions and some of the more radical women’s groups and made for another small but fascinating plank in the anti conscription platform.

At this time, newspapers printed the weekend’s church sermons, providing the mainstream churches with media coverage. For example, on the Sunday before the 1916 referendum, Reverend Law of St Andrew’s Anglican church in Middle Brighton, preached a remarkable sermon entitled ‘Christ a conscript’, which was printed in Monday’s papers. The printing of sermons in newspapers can be viewed as an example of the moral authority of the Church. Historian Roger Thompson, however, analyses this period perceptively by noting that the failure of the conscription referendums in 1916 and 1917, despite the support of nearly all Protestant ministers, indicates that their influence on Australian churchgoers at the ballot box was questionable. He argues that, while the views of Protestant clergy continued to carry community respect at this time, many Australian Protestants’ religious practice was already nominal in nature.³⁷

As was the custom of the Fellowship, many members delivered talks to the group over the years. Around 1918, the poet RH Long addressed the Fellowship on ‘The temptation of fear’. Long was a poet, socialist and active member of the Fellowship, later imprisoned three times for flying the red flag

of socialism at Yarra Bank. Frederick Sinclaire admired Long greatly, describing him as ‘a spiritual kinsman of St Francis and Walt Whitman’.³⁸ Long chose the topic because he saw a discrepancy between society’s moral and intellectual perceptions. During the address, Long claimed to be a ‘practical idealist’: the practical controlled by fear and the idealistic by love. This is a suitable description for the Fellowship as a whole, and Sinclaire in particular, as they grappled with how to live out their ideals in wartime. It was difficult to know what their Christian socialist idealism looked like in wartime amid turbulent political and social change.

Later in his address, Long stated that the practical always fears the ideal. According to Long, however, the power of love enabled him to ‘return good for evil and kiss the very hands that strike to deal its death blow’. Long also described the fear he experienced in pursuit of the ideal but never wavered in his allegiance to his ideal self, which represented the Christian ethic. He concluded by saying ‘I believe that anything that is ideally true is also practically true – even in our time and generation – had we but the faith and courage to press forwards’. It may seem like tilting at windmills, but such dreams can inspire new possibilities and the imagining of new futures.³⁹

The war and the conscription debates were a dramatic and creative time for Sinclaire. He rose to the challenge and repeatedly displayed the courage of his convictions, without regard for personal or professional consequences. Winston Rhodes describes how members of the Fellowship were ‘inspired by the personality of one man [Sinclaire], by his breadth of vision, his integrity and his scholarship’.⁴⁰

The Free Religious Fellowship was a constellation of Melbourne’s progressive Christians established on the advent of war. The group was inspired by Frederick Sinclaire and shared a grand vision to live as a new kind of church. Through the early 1920s, however, the Fellowship continued to face constant struggles in recruiting and retaining members and it was regularly unable to fulfil its financial commitments to pay Sinclaire’s salary or hire meeting rooms.⁴¹ *Fellowship* ceased publication in July 1922 and the Fellowship became a club in 1924 as its members went their separate ways in the postwar world. Sinclaire was later appointed to academic posts in Western Australia and New Zealand, before retiring in 1946. In these years, he attended the Anglican Church and died at Christchurch, New Zealand, on 6 December 1954.