Richard Harries

Sydney Bailey, the great Quaker expert on the United Nations, was a central figure in the life of the Council on Christian Approaches to Defence and Disarmament (CCADD) from its beginning in 1963. I got to know Sydney best as a member of a working party under his chairmanship which eventually produced *Human Rights and Responsibilities in Britain and Ireland: A Christian Perspective* (published by Macmillan in 1988). This working party was set up at the highest level, politically and ecumenically (including within its membership Mary Robinson, who subsequently became President of the Irish Republic). The project was, in fact, very much Sydney’s initiative and he worked behind the scenes to bring the group into existence. It was his conviction that, whatever the political outcome in Northern Ireland, there were certain fundamental rights and obligations that needed to be recognised by all parties, and that spelling these out in advance could help ease the way towards a political solution. It was a typical expression of Sydney’s practical, constructive approach to apparently insoluble political dilemmas.

It would also be right, at the outset of this book dedicated to Sydney, to pay tribute to Brenda his wife, without whom he would hardly have been able to operate. Sydney was partially paralysed as a result of illness contracted during his Quaker ambulance service in China in the Second World War and as we met in Dublin, Belfast or London there was always Brenda standing by with a wheelchair and helping hand.

Mention of China enables me to share one incident in Sydney’s life which remains vividly with me. At our meetings it was customary to celebrate Holy Communion together informally in a room and all, including Roman Catholics, were glad to partake. After one such service Sydney told me that, when in China, he had come across a dying Chinese. The man turned out to be a Christian and he asked for a priest from whom he could receive the sacrament. There was no priest available and, indeed, no bread or wine. So Sydney read the institution narrative from the Gospels and gave the
man Holy Communion with the only elements available, rice and water. ‘Was I wrong, Richard?’ he asked. ‘Of course not’, I replied. It was a wonderful expression of the Quaker sacramental view of life.

In our attitudes to the use of armed force, Sydney and I were polar opposites. He was a Quaker, I am a Niebuhrian. I believed that during the Cold War a nuclear stalemate was the safest of the options available. He could not, of course, countenance this from a moral point of view. But although we were so different in our approaches, Sydney was always good to talk with because he was less concerned about ideological stances than with how, in the real world, things could be moved forward in the direction of peace and justice. He was also refreshingly undogmatic and honest, being willing to concede weaknesses in a pacifist or nuclear pacifist approach, when he recognised them. Then, of course, he knew so much more than most of us about the details of peacemaking and peacekeeping. For all these reasons and others it was indeed fitting that Lord Runcie, when Archbishop of Canterbury, should have awarded Sydney a Lambeth doctorate.

According to his own account, Sydney was converted to pacifism by a senior Anglican figure who preached at his school – expounding Jesus’ injunction to ‘render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s’ as a mandate to defend and extend the British Empire. Even at the age of 14, Sydney’s analytical mind was sufficiently developed to distinguish between the ‘defending’ for which he could see the arguments and the ‘extending’ which he rejected. Thereafter he was the only boy in his school not in the Officers’ Training Corps.

For Sydney Bailey pacifism was not an excuse for lazy thinking or posturing from the ‘moral high ground’. If anything, it led him to be more exacting and determined to engage with the views of others of different persuasions. His concern was not to disapprove, but to improve the response to complex moral challenges through rigorous discussion with a wide range of diplomats, civil servants, ethicists and policymakers.

Even in the last months of his 79-year life, book after book emerged as he distilled his experience for coming generations. This last fruitful period is an immense testimony both to his wisdom and to the disciplined use of the limited time when he was not prevented by pain from writing. The results were Peace is a Process (1993), The UN Security Council and Human Rights (1994), and updated versions of The United Nations: A Concise Political Guide (1995) and