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How the Christian Faith Helped World War I Soldiers on the Western Front Cope with Shell-Shock

Nicholas Arata

The First World War's extensive use of trench warfare exposed soldiers to some of industrialized war's greatest horrors. In such a hellish environment, one would think that such horrors would corrupt a soldier's faith in his Christian beliefs. How could a loving God allow such atrocities to occur? However, not only did faith help countless soldiers through the war, but Christianity helped relieve the symptoms of war neuroses, such as "shell-shock." Armies across Europe used chaplains to give soldiers a religious guide, and those chaplains provided a religious outlet for the common soldier. To increase the effectiveness of the common soldier, these chaplains assisted with "shell-shock", a medical term for the war neurosis that hindered thousands of soldiers during and after service. Beyond that, religious faith in Christian soldiers on the Western Front helped alleviate the psychological damages of trench warfare during World War I. This paper will consider the experiences of Catholic and Protestant soldiers and the roles of Anglican and Jesuit chaplains during and after the First World War to demonstrate how the Christian faith assisted them in their peril.

Trench Warfare and Its Effect on Soldiers' Faith and Psychology

The otherworldly and desolate landscape of the trenches on the Western Front created the perfect environment to test the faith of Christian soldiers. An Irish Jesuit priest by the name of John Delaney described the Western front in Belgium as "one great plain of desolation with smashed-in tanks, broken-down wagons, carcasses of horses rotting away in all states of corruption."¹ The

Western Front resembled a place where mankind's savagery had destroyed all of God's Creation. Destruction, death, and ruin replaced the rolling pastures and forests that, to the 20-year-old Christian soldier, God created in His own design in Western Europe. Seemingly, this apparent abandonment would make soldiers less religious, but this test made many soldiers much more pious.

The graphic horrors of trench warfare damaged soldiers' psychological well-being, which resulted in shell-shock for many of the afflicted. The high death rates and close quarters made the trenches into a hellhole of gore: "All along trench, am stepping over dead bodies. Some men shot clean through heart or head...most with looks of agony or horror on their faces – if faces were not blown away – nearly all mangled in ghastly fashion."² Soldiers saw horrid and unforgettable sights everywhere they looked. The images became imprinted on combatants' memories because of the images' shocking details. British chaplain Kenneth Best continued to describe living in the trenches in his personal journal: "Blood, flies and smell – I shall never forget it. As one crawled along the trench, hands and legs of the dead hanging over the edge would strike one's face."³ The gore affected multiple senses: sight, touch, and smell. Thus, soldiers' psyches became damaged by the repeated occurrences of such horror, which resulted in shell-shock for so many soldiers. But why else did shell-shock occur in soldiers?

Shell-shock occurred because many soldiers did not know how to deal with the horrors of trench warfare. While in service and for years afterwards, soldiers relived these experiences by seeing the gore in their dreams, feeling the corpses in flashbacks, or even losing their senses of smell or taste. Kenneth Best described seeing soldiers duck and cover at the slightest sounds or, even in his own case, suffering from flashbacks of the fighting.⁴ No 18-year-old man could psychologically or emotionally handle such graphic sights without assistance. Thus, the soldier began to lose his mind from the intense and seemingly unjustified experiences. Servicemembers wanted to know *why* so much death occurred, or when would death come to *himself*. Without help, many men broke down and became incapable of fighting. For many soldiers, help came in the form of their belief in Christianity.

The Roles and Faith of Chaplains and Infantry during The Great War

From the point of view of many armies' high commands, chaplains existed not to give soldiers a religious outlet, but in order to keep troop morale high. American brigadier general Charles Cole wrote in a letter to a United States Senator: "The chaplains are a tremendous influence and assistance to the officers in keeping up the morale and discipline of the men."⁵ Chaplains kept morale up by organizing soccer games, boxing matches, and other recreational events for the soldiers. Armies did not care if the soldiers' religious needs were satisfied in and of themselves. For example, the British army failed to supply chaplain Best with enough Bibles or hymnals.⁶ The army only cared if the chaplains could keep morale up, because a higher morale created a more effective fighting force. Ultimately, a military exists to win a war, so the need to win battles outweighed the proper religious satisfaction of its combatants. However, chaplains did fulfill their own perceived duty of helping soldiers spiritually.

The persevering faith of the chaplains helped the standard infantry stay pious on the front, even though the chaplains experienced many of the same challenges to their own faith. Most chaplains kept their faith even during trying times. For example, Irish Jesuit priests Fathers Frank Browne and John Fitzgibbon thanked God for keeping them safe during separate attacks, which resulted in a shrapnel wound for Browne and both a lost altar kit and potential death or capture for Fitzgibbon.^{7,8} Their faith set examples for their congregation of infantrymen to hold fast to their trust in God. Many young men would question their deity after experiencing the horrors of trench warfare. However, by following the examples set by their pious chaplains, soldiers could continue to practice their religion and put their confidence in God. Therefore, chaplains fulfilled both their own main goal and the army administration's goal: faithful Christian soldiers with positive morale.

Soldiers remained pious throughout combat, even when confronted with the horrors of war. Infantrymen demonstrated their faith in God through their poetry. W. H. Littlejohn's "Holy Communion, Suvla Bay" describes soldiers receiving communion and praying to God while in the trenches.⁹ "How Long, O Lord" by

Robert Palmer chastises humanity for polluting God's Creation and asking God, "How long, O Lord, how long before the flood / Of crimson-welling carnage shall abate?"¹⁰ In "A Christmas Prayer," Cyril Winterbotham pleads, "O Jesus, pitiful, draw near, / That even we may see / The Little Child who knew not fear; Thus would we picture thee."¹¹ These soldiers all still held a belief in Christianity even after experiencing the hell of war. Even though all of these poems include death, shell bombardments, and destruction, the writers pray to God and ask for help and protection. A soldier who lost his trust in God would not compose prayers and poems seeking divine assistance. Only the pious held enough faith to believe that divine intervention can bring protection.

Christian servicemembers held so closely to their religion due to the expectation of a glorious afterlife. The poems "Release" and "To any Dead Officer" both demonstrate how many soldiers lost their fear of death due to the comfort of Heaven: "Be still and send your soul into the all, / The vasty distance where the stars shine blue, / No longer antlike on the earth to crawl. / Released from time and sense of great or small," and "Well, how are things in Heaven? I wish you'd say, / Because I'd like to know that you're all right. / Tell me, have you found everlasting day."¹² Neither soldier feared death because they believed in Heaven's eternal painlessness and greatness. Christians are taught that life is just a stage before the glorious afterlife, as in 2 Corinthians 4:18: "So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."¹³ The afterlife lacks any of the pain or suffering that trench life created. Stressors such as physical and mental exhaustion, being buried alive, vermin, disease, stress, etc., weighed heavily on the men, but would be absent in Heaven. Christianity and its Scripture, therefore, created a light at the end of a very dark tunnel.

The Bible also helped many soldiers stay pious on the front line with its emphasis on God and peace. According to historian Adrian Gregory, "Yet it is clear that for Anglo-Saxon and German Protestants the vernacular Bible served a remarkably similar purpose to the Roman Catholic rosary, both as physical protection from danger and as contemplative aid for prayer."¹⁴ Many men looked to Bibles for knowledge of the Christian religion and for guidance in prayer and spirituality. Without the guidance of their

chaplain-supplied Bibles, how could combatants learn of God's protection and of Heaven? Upon reading about such things, soldiers felt unstoppable against the enemy. Soldiers would not fear impending death, as discussed in the last paragraph. Prayers helped the Christian men feel closer with God through communicating with Him. So, many combatants did not feel alone when they communicated with God. With the help of such religious inspiration, soldiers endured through the conflict.

Infantrymen and chaplains took refuge in the action of prayer in order to feel protected by God. Richard Schweitzer tells the story of an American soldier named Joe Downey who "prayed and prayed" while hiding in a foxhole during combat.¹⁵ Schweitzer also quotes a British Tommy named Christopher Haworth who recorded, "I find myself praying at odd moments, sometimes in the quiet, sometimes under shell fire, sometimes when even working the Lewis gun."¹⁶ The two quotes demonstrate how so many held to their religion while in danger. If a man prays to his God for help, the man believes that God can help him. So, by praying, the man acknowledges God's existence and that He possesses mercy. The Lord's pity will come in the form of protection over the soldiers. However, the piety of Christian soldiers would not end at the front.

The Post-Service Faith of Chaplains and Soldiers

Chaplains retaining occupations in the Christian church after the war proved that the Great War did not shake their faith, and neither was their faith temporary. Linda Parker notes, "Of the 111 Anglican Bishops in active ministry in 1940, 32 were former chaplains," and the paragraph also lists several chaplains who studied religious disciplines, such as pastoral theology, moral theology, and incarnational theology.¹⁷ Chaplains would have abandoned Christianity if the war had ruined their trust in God, or if it were only a temporary necessity. The war probably strengthened many of these chaplains' faith because becoming a bishop requires intense study and dedication to the Church. Only a man truly inspired by God could spend his whole life studying and pursuing Christianity. Their time at the front either inspired or strengthened their beliefs in a way that would hold for decades afterwards.

The fact that many young men became chaplains and

continued to work as theologians after the Great War demonstrated how the war created a strong faith in some soldiers. Many chaplains did not actually work in the Church before the war: “He [researcher Edward Madigan] found that 411 [of 723 Anglican chaplains] were Oxford educated, with 64 from Trinity College Dublin.”¹⁸ These men, schooled as academics in university before the war, perhaps did not plan to go into the Church. However, after serving as chaplains, many became ordained and worked as chaplains in colonies, missionaries, parishes, and other Anglican communities.¹⁹ These soldiers may not have exercised strong faith or piety in the church before the war, but service changed that aspect of their characters. The war made these men into devout and inspired Christians who were willing to spread their faith to non-Christians in the far corners of the English Empire. To persist as a missionary, strong faith is essential, and those who lose this faith risk losing the missionary spirit. However, the infantry also demonstrated strong faith after the First World War.

The number of veterans who became involved in the Church after service demonstrated how the war instilled a deep faith in many soldiers. J.V. Macmillan created an Anglican “pre-ordination educational centre” in order to prepare veterans for ordination, and “out of 675 candidates who passed through its doors, 435 were eventually ordained.”²⁰ Much like their chaplain “padres,” many soldiers became inspired by the front to dedicate their lives to religion. These men felt deeply affected and touched by God while on the front and wanted to serve Him. Schweitzer’s statistic only takes into account the hundreds of veterans who attended that particular center. One can easily speculate that many other veterans may have become ordained in different Christian sects at different centers in even more countries than England. Other veterans may have been “born again” but did not pursue ordination. Countless veterans probably decided to participate in church services or follow the Christian teachings more often or more closely than before the war. Even men who did not adhere to Christianity’s morals and ethics before the war became more pious after the war.

What about those servicemembers who felt disillusioned with Christianity after the Great War? Danish atheist Thomas Dinesen explained in his memoirs that many soldiers on the Western Front proved weary of organized religion.²¹ Dinesen’s anecdotal

evidence, however, does not prove atheism. Soldiers could still consider themselves devout Christians without Catholic or Anglican membership. Other critics point to the rise of irreligious Marxism or Nihilism as evidence of how World War I inspired Atheism in Europe, but these philosophies find their roots in non-religious conflicts. Decades of disgust with the czarist government, not artillery shells and psychological stress, created the Russian Revolution. With the exception of individual cases, consequently, World War I did not defeat Christianity in Western Europe.

World War I made many infantrymen who did not identify as religious into devout Christians during and after the war. Many men who came into the army were not religious. However, many of these same men left service with a whole new appreciation and love for the Christian faith. For example, in an article for *The Atlantic Monthly*, an American Baptist chaplain named Harry Emerson Fosdick noted that “some whose spiritual life in milder days was little noted, flame out in brilliant faith amid war’s horrors, like flairs that light No-Man’s Land at night.”²² Many of the born-again combatants that Fosdick met felt closer to Jesus Christ, and many of the men came to God in order to feel safe while living on the front. But how did these men become such devout Christians?

Fosdick believed that the front made these men into much more faithful followers of the Christian faith. In fact, Fosdick attributes this change in the infantry to their close quarters with the chaplains and YMCA secretaries: chaplains were close enough to the common soldier that they were often “living with him, eating, sleeping, fighting, dying with him.”²³ The chaplains introduced these men to the teachings of God through services and readings of the Bible. So, when these men returned home, they carried along these teachings and ideals. At home, instead of attending field services, these new veterans attended services in churches. Instead of speaking to the chaplain about the Bible, these new veterans attended Bible studies with their local congregations and local priests. The new faith would also help soldiers on the front and at home in psychological, not just spiritual, ways.

Alleviation of the Psychological Damages of Trench Warfare

Trust in an ever-present God caused many soldiers not to feel

abandoned by their God at the front. As discussed in the paper's second paragraph, the desolate landscape would seem to be devoid of God, but many soldiers felt that God had never left their side, even while living in the trenches. So many of the Bible's quotes teach about the Lord never leaving one's side: "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you," and "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."²⁴ After receiving a Bible from the chaplain, the soldier would have read many of these passages, and eventually the man would realize that no matter how desperate the situation may seem, he was not alone. Loneliness can negatively affect one's mental state, often driving many to depression or madness. Therefore, faith in God helped prevent a potential psychological damage of trench warfare.

Religion helped soldiers come to terms with the horrors of war by bringing structure and purpose to seemingly random events. Some combatants found that understanding the seemingly random killing of their comrades was difficult. However, some servicemembers, such as Englishman Thomas Penrose Marks, found that Christianity gave answers to the "terrible ifs" of battle.²⁵ Scripture and chaplains taught that the deaths were all part of God's plan. Death on the front was not random or without purpose. But in fact, God knew ahead of time who was to live and who was to die. Many combatants acquired a steady peace of mind. No longer did the young men ask "why" or live tormented by the uncertainty and "ifs" of battle. This idea also helped infantrymen and chaplains at the front avoid another detriment of shell-shock: survivor's guilt.

The belief in "God's greater plan" helped many men avoid the psychological complication of survivor's guilt. Survivor's guilt, or the feeling of guilt that results when a soldier survives but his comrades perish, is a dangerous aspect of shell-shock. British Lieutenant William St. Ledger reconciled his survivor's guilt after losing two of his close friends: "I believe that everyone comes into this world for two purposes. 1. To do a certain work. 2. To fit himself for a better existence. When he has done these two things, I believe he is taken away to God to enjoy his rest."²⁶ St. Ledger avoided the disastrous effects of survivor's guilt because he believed that God

knew when his lost comrades had fulfilled the two purposes. This British Tommy felt no hatred or anger toward the Lord because he knew that God was executing His master plan by taking the friends away. St. Ledger, consequently, mitigated any potential shell-shock, and others may have felt similarly.

Civilians who could not understand the experiences of the front isolated many veterans who returned from the war. Many veterans felt alone because nobody could understand the traumatic experiences from service, and, in actuality, civilians could not come close to understanding the horrors of trench warfare. The soldiers needed an outlet for the amount of killing and carnage they experienced. Thus, many soldiers suffered from the negative psychological effects of feeling alone in their experiences.

The abundance of war in the Bible, however, helped many soldiers not feel alone or isolated. By reading the Bible, many soldiers acquired an outlet for what they saw during service. The Old Testament of the Bible contains many stories of war and carnage. Veterans read these stories and realized that they did not live alone. Instead of healing at the front, the healing could now occur in the home front, as well. Scripture lessened the effects of shell-shock at home. Healing on the home front is important because most of shell-shock's long-term effects occurred after World War I. The Bible, therefore, helped soldiers cope with their shell-shock in a new way.

Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy, an Anglican chaplain, once described the First World War as creating a "run on the bank of God."²⁷ Countless Christian soldiers relied on God and their Christian faith for guidance and help during the Great War. In doing so, by reading the Bible, relying on God, praying, and exercising their faith, many Christians alleviated the negative effects of shell-shock. Faith helped troopers avoid the harmful feelings of abandonment, the lack of structure in war, survivor's guilt, and incomprehension of civilians at home. All of these feelings contributed to shell-shock. The First World War did create a "run on the bank of God", but a quote by Mike Moriarty, an American officer during the Iraq War, may sum up why so many soldiers held to their Christian beliefs: "If you didn't have any faith, you'd probably have a very hard time leaving that wire everyday."²⁸

Notes

- ¹ Thomas Morrissey, "Fr John Delaney S.J.," *Irish Jesuit Chaplains in the First World War*, ed. Damien Burke (Ireland: Messenger, 2014), 36.
- ² Kenneth Best, "Chronological Diaries and Letters, September 1914- October 1915," *A Chaplain at Gallipoli: The Great War Diaries of Kenneth Best*, ed. Gavin Roynon (London: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 140-41.
- ³ Kenneth Best, "Chronological Diaries and Letters, September 1914- October 1915," *A Chaplain at Gallipoli: The Great War Diaries of Kenneth Best*, 141.
- ⁴ Kenneth Best, "Chronological Diaries and Letters, September 1914- October 1915," *A Chaplain at Gallipoli: The Great War Diaries of Kenneth Best*, 146.
- ⁵ Michael E. Shay, "Going Home," *Sky Pilots: The Yankee Division Chaplains in World War I* (Columbia: University of Missouri, 2014), 124.
- ⁶ Michael E. Shay, "Going Home," *Sky Pilots: The Yankee Division Chaplains in World War I*, 61.
- ⁷ E.E. O'Donnell, "Fr. Frank Browne S.J.," *Irish Jesuit Chaplains in the First World War*, 25.
- ⁸ Steve Bellis, "Fr. John Fitzgibbon S.J.," *Irish Jesuit Chaplains in the First World War*, 53.
- ⁹ W.H. Littlejohn, "Holy Communion, Sulva Bay," *The Muse in Arms* (London: John Murray, 1917), 171.
- ¹⁰ Robert Palmer, "How Long, O Lord," *The Muse in Arms*, 162.
- ¹¹ Cyril Winterbotham, "A Christmas Prayer," *The Muse in Arms*, 169.
- ¹² Colwyn Phillips, "Release," *The Muse in Arms*, 162; Siegfried Sassoon "To Any Dead Officer," *The War Poems of Siegfried Sassoon* (London: William Heinemann, 1920), 69.
- ¹³ 2 Cor. 4:18 (New International Version).
- ¹⁴ Adrian Gregory, "Beliefs and Religion," *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, ed. Jay M. Winter, vol. III (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2014), 435.
- ¹⁵ Richard Schweitzer, "Soldiers' Religious Responses within the Narrative Structure of Battle," *The Cross and the Trenches: Religious Faith and Doubt among British and American Great War Soldiers* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 133.
- ¹⁶ Richard Schweitzer, "Soldiers' Religious Responses within the Narrative Structure of Battle," *The Cross and the Trenches: Religious Faith and Doubt among British and American Great War Soldiers*, 133.
- ¹⁷ Linda Parker, "'Shell-Shocked Prophets': Anglican Army Chaplains and Post-War Reform in the Church of England," *The Clergy in Khaki: New Perspectives on British Army Chaplaincy in the First World War*, ed. M. F. Snape and Edward Madigan (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013), 196.
- ¹⁸ Richard Schweitzer, "Soldiers' Religious Responses within the Narrative Structure of Battle," *The Cross and the Trenches: Religious Faith and Doubt among British and American Great War Soldiers*, 186.

¹⁹ Richard Schweitzer, "Soldiers' Religious Responses within the Narrative Structure of Battle," *The Cross and the Trenches: Religious Faith and Doubt among British and American Great War Soldiers*, 186.

²⁰ Schweitzer, Richard. "The Revival that Never Came, Conjecture." *The Cross and the Trenches: Religious Faith and Doubt among British and American Great War Soldiers*. 194.

²¹ Dinesen, Thomas. *Merry Hell!: A Dane with the Canadians* (London: Jarrolds, 1930).

²² Harry Emerson Fosdick, "The Trenches and the Church at Home," *Atlantic Monthly*, Jan. 1919, 22.

²³ Harry Emerson Fosdick, "The Trenches and the Church at Home," *Atlantic Monthly*, 22.

²⁴ Deuteronomy 31:6, (New International Version); *Isaiah* 41:10, (New International Version).

²⁵ Richard Schweitzer, "Soldiers' Religious Responses within the Narrative Structure of Battle," *The Cross and the Trenches: Religious Faith and Doubt among British and American Great War Soldiers*, 136.

²⁶ Richard Schweitzer, "Soldiers' Religious Responses within the Narrative Structure of Battle," *The Cross and the Trenches: Religious Faith and Doubt among British and American Great War Soldiers*, 136.

²⁷ Adrian Gregory, "Beliefs and Religion," *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, ed. Jay M. Winter, vol. III (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2014), 420.

²⁸ *The War Tapes*, Dir. Deborah Scranton, Independent, 2006.