

Prologue

The long history of Judaism and of Christianity was a tale of war, often cast as the will of God. We have only to remember the whole array of divine pronouncements recorded in the Hebrew Bible, the assumption in the Epistles and Gospels that soldiers were part of normal life, and the sign in the sky given to Constantine, founding emperor of the Christian west: a cross underscored with the caption, "In this Sign thou shalt conquer." Crusader kings led their soldiers off to war to defend and extend European rule in the belief that "God wills it." The seventeenth-century wars of religion in central Europe paired dynastic goals with Catholic or Protestant religious interests. War had to be part of God's plan, according to Christian theologians from Saint Augustine through the Catholic and Protestant writers of the early twentieth century.¹ Therefore, from 1914 to 1918 religious believers and hopeful skeptics tried to find meaning and purpose behind divinely willed destruction. We have the random words of German, French, and English soldiers and the religious writings of bishops, priests, ministers, and rabbis as they tried to make sense of it all. For what collective horror could better display the mystery of a divine will than the frontline attacks and defenses across northern France, where millions of Christians and Jews on both sides of the conflict slaughtered one another for over four years?

This is a history of soldier religion and the official religion of churches and synagogues, with their clergy on and behind the front, along with the testimonies of the women who provided pastoral and medical care up by the front lines. We track experiences ranging from average men barely able

to express their simplest feelings, religious or otherwise, to men fully engaged in a struggle to solve the religious quandaries within them. A few of them became philosophical and theological innovators for the twentieth century: the German Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig, the German Lutheran minister Paul Tillich, the French Catholic priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and the Anglican clergyman Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy. Across the book we simply let the soldiers and church people have their say about their Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish religion and have their say about being German, French, or English citizens, because what they have to *say* counts the most here. Let's call this "God-talk," expressing faith and moral choice, and let's call it "nation-talk," expressing either a simple sentiment or political, even warlike, nationalism. Of course, to narrate religious and national experiences is to narrate *anti*-religious and *anti*-national experiences also and so place in higher relief the talk about God and nation. Without evidence to the contrary, we can only believe that they are all describing their actual experiences and do our best to select, arrange, and transmit them.² In this history of European countries at war, the experiences of colonial troops, some of them Hindu and some of them Muslim, and American troops in the last year of the war are part of the English and French stories.

We explore, then, the "varieties of religious experience," to use the words of the American psychologist and philosopher William James, and the "varieties of national experience." At the beginning of the twentieth century, James examined the natural will-to-believe and the religious feeling at the center of each person's existence. In the middle of the century, German existentialist psychologists said that the foundations of personalities were the specific "worlds" they lived in: the natural world around them (*umwelt*), the world of fellow humans they interacted with (*mitwelt*), and the interior worlds of self-awareness and identity they constructed at the same time (*eigenwelt*). Soldiers and church leaders reported a surrounding catastrophic world, reported a chaos of interactions, and reported from within the passions of their personal existence.³ This is the range of experiences that appears in the talk.

National sentiment and nationalism happen when populations come to interpret and concretize their collective life together, controlling regional destinies, and obtaining voting rights. Major examples of the process are the French revolutionary decade, the English parliamentary reforms of the 1800s, and the European revolutions of 1848. Broadly speaking, across the nineteenth century the greater the tensions in nation building, the greater was the

utilization of religion.⁴ And vice versa: the more religion was highlighted, the more was the nation given cosmic importance. Mobilized by a national government, in the uniform of its army, every person in the military was self-consciously fighting for the nation. The dramas of war and destruction were presented in apocalyptic—end of the world—language.⁵ The consummate expression of apocalyptic evil was the work of the German-language author, Karl Kraus, a leading Austrian writer and journalist, who captivated listeners in Berlin with imagery that he utilized in his huge sprawling play, *The Last Days of Mankind*: a graphic portrayal of the ugliness, the futility, and the hypocrisy of the war.⁶

Religious and battle experiences in World War I interpenetrated one another, resulting in an array of emotions from despair and horror to the hope that “the Love that moves the sun and the other stars” sung by the poet Dante, could bring light out of the darkness, order out of chaos, and love out of hate. Blaise Cendrars, soldier and poet, who wrote in his autobiographical *La main coupée* (*The Severed Hand*), “God was absent from the battlefields,” presumed a western front of darkness, chaos, and hate, and a God of order, light, and love.⁷ Across the narratives in the following eight chapters, the men and women express their faith and moral goals on continua that go from horror to hope, from fatalism to faith, and from class or regional loyalties to full national loyalty.

1. The story of the God experience on the western front begins with the mobilization of eligible men, recruits and reservists, in Germany, France, and England, as war was declared. Focus here is on the moods expressed and behaviors recorded in Berlin and Munich, in Paris, in London, with glimpses of other cities in Germany, France, and England. The principal newspapers reported the end of diplomacy and the mobilization news in the major headlines. Reports were filled with raucous crowds, patriotic gatherings, and, more importantly, scenes of bravado and sadness at the train stations as the men left for duty, leaving wives, children, parents, and friends. Occasionally, reporters would catch a comment, focus on an embrace, and even record their own feelings. Formal German, French, and English religion-talk, duly reported in the news, came mainly from church leaders, who sent the soldiers on their way with preaching and theology that justified the grim realities of their war. In sermons and publications, the Evangelical Church authorities in Berlin, Cardinal von Bettinger of Munich, Cardinal Amette of Paris, and Bishop Winnington-Ingram of London urged their soldiers on to a triumph of arms and justice.

2. Reports of miracles fed the *imagination*s of soldiers, officers, clergy, and the general public, most of them theologically less self-conscious than the church leaders. Two military dramas that attracted serious attention were the August 1914 Battle of Mons in Belgium and the September 1914 Battle of the Marne, although it actually took years for the stories to develop into “proofs” that God was on the side of the English at Mons and on the side of the French at the Marne. The most lavishly developed presentation, out of all the publications on these dramas, was certainly the Catholic prayer book *Missel du miracle de la Marne* (Missal of the Miracle of the Marne)—published for and used by a select few, however. The average soldier on the front did not experience the Angels of Mons or the Miracle of the Marne, even though the history of the reception and belief in these heavenly interventions spanned the war years. Soldiers and civilians near the front also saw miraculous interventions in church and wayside statues that survived across the battle zones. On the front, German, French, and English devotions to Christ, Mary, the angels, and saints were most often everyday expressions of religious faith, and at times political statements. The one religious event that involved no supposed divine intervention was simply a truce, a fraternizing, and a common celebration of Christmas in 1914.

3. The soldiers of the hostile armies were a cross section of the home populations, and few of them were inclined to believe in miracles anywhere. Churchgoers, nonchurchgoers, believers, and nonbelievers were swallowed up by mobilization into a different world where they reacted with their own religion and nonreligion. Their religion was “inarticulate” or “diffusive” (as observers have described it), because the majority of the soldiers had little to say about “God” or “religion.” Their conversation could reflect a simple assumption of the personal and social usefulness of religion, in fatalism and real devotion. Religious objects, such as Bibles and rosaries could be valued for their religious meaning or simply treated as charms and amulets—more and more often as the war dragged on. The letters of the soldiers, European, colonial, and American, however, regularly contained profound self-reflections, which were both traditionally religious and original in their intensity. The generals and other higher officers often expressed commitment to their religious tradition, saying less about religious feelings and more about basic faith and participation in church services. In fact, they were often seriously religious believers from youth on. Ferdinand Foch was a dedicated Catholic; Douglas Haig, an intense Anglicanized Presbyterian; the German generals, a mixture of Lutheran, Catholic, and spiritualist loyalties.

4. Of course, those soldiers who described in greatest depth and detail their religious experience in the armies were members of the clergy themselves. And here the French priests had the greatest challenge to make sense of the war, because they were the only ones obliged to become active soldiers in the killing fields. Their testimonies should be highlighted because they wrote, often passionately, about the details of the Christian belief and morality that sustained them: the centrality of Christ's crucifixion and the dilemma of killing for the sake of a national cause. As for the German, French, and English chaplains themselves, the magnitude of the physical suffering and disease depleted their energies, and they filled pages, the equivalent of books, about their experiences. German evangelical and Catholic chaplains, and English chaplains in particular, wrote about the challenges of offering comfort to men raised with little experience of Bible reading or church going. Chaplains had to find motivational language to sustain soldiers in the fight, cultivate formal faith, and sympathize with private faith. They had to make sense of the carnage and waste, for themselves as well as for their soldiers.

5. Rabbis and Jewish soldiers believed their national loyalties provided a sure way to first-class citizenship. Their history parallels the history of Christianity on and behind the front in the preceding chapters. All the Jewish chaplains, Orthodox, Conservative, or Reformed, encouraged their men to preserve Jewish solidarity and display national loyalty, which sometimes presented a dilemma for the German, French, and English Jews, because national loyalty precluded Jewish solidarity. German Jewish chaplains were able to structure a system of rabbinical pastoral care and festival celebration. They made the case that Judaism flourished in Germany and cohered perfectly with the German spirit, providing biblical references for a faith that could endure and support war. French Jewish chaplains could easily justify French Jewish rejection of the Germans, in the name of a French republicanism that guaranteed Jewish emancipation and because of perversion of Judaism into militarism in Germany. English chaplains developed a program of preaching and pastoral care to support their far-flung soldiers in prayer and in fighting Germany. Jewish soldiers' letters and diaries reveal the tenacity of community religion. German soldiers who had lived in a Berlin orphanage as boys spoke gratefully of the rigor and piety of their training. A completely secularized French Jew wrote of his wartime respect for the tradition and fidelity to the community.

6. Soldiers did not usually discuss or chat about official beliefs or moral imperatives but left all that to the clergy. In their diaries they recorded their

everyday experiences, justified their killing, and added battle stories to express both love of the fatherland and personal fears. For German soldiers, Belgian treachery was the theme; condemnation of it, the normal response, with snipers likened to Satan. They respected, engaged with, or rejected religion, their patriotism waxing and waning, as they deployed across the western front. French soldiers highlighted the butchery of war and the humanity of the men fighting on both sides. English soldiers did not hesitate to graphically describe everyday agony in the battles of each year of the war: fighting in Flanders, at the Somme, turning back the German final advance, and connecting with the French military and civilian population. But over the years, a handful of diaries, some then published only recently, set religion and irreligion in high profile. The German Stephan Westmann recorded his deep-set appreciation for religion, the Frenchman Ferdinand Belmont his personal prayer engagement, and the Englishman Arthur Graeme West his total rejection of religion.

7. Following the news and trying to understand the suffering of the fighting men, the German, French, and English clergy, bishops and priests, carried on their own war . . . of words! Spokesmen for both sides created their own theologies of right and might appropriate to the war. German and English Protestants—Anglicans in the majority—decried each other's base motives and evil actions, the English citing the bellicosity of German military men and philosophers, biblical liberalism, Kaiser-centered nationalism, and the destruction of Belgium; the Germans citing Britain's betrayal of Anglo-Saxon culture, colonial cruelties, and crass utilitarianism, mounting at the same time strong defenses of the Belgium invasion and German national sentiment. Both sides promoted the standard just-war theology common to both German and English Christians. German and French Catholic bishops and priests attacked the errors and injustices of the other side, devoting whole books of essays to the enterprise. The French accused Germans and their clergy of submission to German militarism and Protestantism, and of promoting "might makes right." When the French vaunted the Christian spirit that had developed in France since the beginnings of Christianity, the Germans responded with attacks on a Catholic France corrupted by secularism, with its newfound and specious concern for Belgian sovereignty, and its greater concern for Reims cathedral and the University of Louvain library than for human lives.

8. The old theologies of the churchmen warring *behind* the lines had none of the existential immediacy and postwar influence of four young theologians

on the front lines. Writing on postcards sent from the front, the German philosopher, Franz Rosenzweig, created a new expression of Jewish mysticism and universalism. As chaplains for the Christian soldiers of Germany, France, and England, Paul Tillich, Teilhard de Chardin, and Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy—a Lutheran, a Roman Catholic, and an Anglican—developed Christian identities and theologies to show that “God” *was* on the western front. They rejected simplistic religious interpretations of war, after much suffering and deep thinking. For Tillich, a chaplain in and out of the trenches, Luther’s fundamental dictum of salvation by faith alone mutated into a twentieth-century “faith alone” conviction that could only survive if accompanied by the death of the religious imagination. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the Jesuit paleontologist turned stretcher-bearer, saw the killing and destruction of war as essential to evolution, leading to a cosmos ultimately transformed into the infinite Christ of faith. Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy, chaplain and poet, in order to make sense of war for himself and his soldiers, insisted that *God suffered*, not only in the passion and death of his Christ but in all human suffering, epitomized in the current war. With them, as with Franz Rosenzweig, came the blossoming of a new theological expression that developed in germ as the war progressed.

In fine, I have organized everything to explain the religious reality of this war of nations, attending to the individual psychologies, that is to say the individual experiences, of the soldiers and church leaders. This is the way it was according to the sources: a combination of classic collections of letters, diaries, and other testimonies—German, French, and English.

I do need here a formal historian’s moment to point to endnotes and sources. Endnotes contain page numbers for my quotations, of course, but also provide references to helpful scholarly texts in several languages. Michael Snape and Edward Madigan for England, Annette Becker and Xavier Boniface for France, and Gerd Krumeich and Claudia Schlager for Germany deserve special mention. There are few ambiguities and even fewer disagreements among them, so I can draw from their syntheses as I present my own. The clearest breakdown of the historiography is Hanneke Takken’s study of World War I chaplains. She notes the English argument on the failures and successes, dominated recently by the historians emphasizing chaplain successes; the French concentration on priest soldiers as luminaries of the *Union sacrée*, inasmuch as they reduced secular antagonism to the church; and the

German literature during the war, which criticized the chaplains' exemption from combat, on the one hand, and after the war systematically ignored their contributions, on the other. She also notes that the shape and style of chaplain and soldier religion depended on the relationship of the home churches to state, society, and nation; in other words, the government, the people, and national history of each of the belligerent nations predetermined many of the features of religion on the western front.⁸

Four major church archives served as a reality check on the data. For Protestant and Catholic Germany, I consulted the Zentralarchiv of the German Evangelical Church (Lutheranism and Reform Protestantism mainly) in Berlin and the Archiv des Erzbistums München und Freising in Munich; for primarily Catholic France, I consulted the Archives historiques de l'Archevêché de Paris; and to a lesser extent, for officially Anglican England, I consulted the online archives of Lambeth Palace, the London residence of the archbishop of Canterbury. With due appreciation of the previous fine syntheses of Xavier Boniface regarding World War I religion on all fronts and Philip Jenkins on the "holy war" elements of the conflict, I do have my own specific voice, because I have worked across the years as a historian of modern Europe and—officially only at the beginning of those years—as a priest.⁹ I amass and interpret in my own way the testimonies that have come to us from that accursed western front and from those behind it on either side.

Finally, I permit myself an ego-biographical moment, because there is scarcely a book on World War I that does not begin with an image or story of the author's experience or memories of grandparents or great-grandparents who fought in the war. For me, there were the soldier uncles who went off to Europe in 1917. Decades before I was born, my mother's oldest brother, who had thought about a career in the religious life, saw action in the Argonne, and my father's oldest brother, then a young dentist, headed for Europe to spend his time crawling along his small section of the front administering morphine to wounded and dying soldiers. One uncle returned cynical about religion and the other returned cynical about Europe. Finally in 1918, my father, with his brand-new dental degree from the University of Pennsylvania, stayed in Philadelphia, hardest hit of American cities by the Spanish flu, helping out—tragically, more as an undertaker's assistant than as medical personnel. One hundred years after the November 1918 armistice *to the day*, when I was only by happenstance in Germany, I attended a Protestant-Catholic-Orthodox service in the Berliner Dom, the great church on the Unter den

Linden Boulevard: *"Frieden in Europa": Ökumenische Gottesdienst zum Ende des 1. Weltkrieges vor 100 Jahren* ("Peace in Europe": Ecumenical Worship Service for the End of World War I a Hundred Years Ago). It took a century that included a genocidal second war to get to what is even today an uneasy peace. "The last days of mankind," to use the words of Karl Kraus's play, World War I was not. But what it was, insofar as it represented the survival of the human spirit in a hellish setting, I now attempt to explain.