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Reconsidering British Religion and the First World War

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From that moment all my religion died, after that journey all my teaching and belief in God had left me—never to return.[1]

The centenary in November 2016 of the conclusion of the battle of the Somme, the bloodiest battle in British history and the most sanguinary of that worldwide conflict, produced the usual slew of media commentary on the First World War. The words above are those of Charles Bartram, a Yorkshire colliery worker speaking of his experiences on 1 July 1916, a day on which nearly 20,000 British soldiers died while trying to breach German defences in the rolling country of the department of the Somme. Prefacing a BBC Education report posted by Sean Coughlan on 17 November 2016, Bartram's words encapsulate what many think *ought* to have happened to religious belief on the Somme, and in the larger cauldron of the war. Although he failed to develop Bartram's story, or pursue the subject of faith in the trenches, Coughlan explained that Bartram's striking testimony formed part of a huge collection of interviews conducted by Martin Middlebrook, a pioneering oral historian of the First World War, whose Somme material

1. Coughlan, "Graphic Eyewitness Somme Accounts."

had now found its way into the archives of the Imperial War Museum. Middlebrook's Somme collection, Coughlan went on, amounted to "more than 500 remarkable first-hand accounts of the World War One battle . . . , the 'vast majority' of which have never been seen before."[2] However, this is clearly not a claim that could be made for Bartram's testimony, for it stood among eleven survivors' statements that concluded Middlebrook's classic account of 1 July 1916, *The First Day on the Somme*, which was published in 1971, and appeared as a Penguin paperback in 1984.[3]

The compelling allure of the theme of war-induced, protest atheism was even more apparent in an article that was published in the Episcopalian magazine the *Living Church* the day before Coughlan's story was posted. Here, under the title "The Great War's Damage to the English Soul and Church," Richard Kew, an Episcopalian priest and adoptive American, deplored a litany of woes that had been visited on "English" faith and society by the implicitly avoidable, self-inflicted calamity of the First World War: "That horrific war scarred the character, personality, and beliefs of the British people," Kew claimed. "My assessment coming back to what is now home in the United States is that the English church, like the rest of the nation, is still wrestling with the consequences of a terrible demographic, psychic, spiritual, cultural, and philosophical catastrophe."[4] Significantly, even First World War veterans proved susceptible to the suggestive power of this myth. Ninety years after being wounded near Ypres, Harry Patch, the last surviving British veteran of the trenches, declared: "I left the army with my faith in the Church of England shattered. When I came home, I joined Combe Down church choir to try to get the faith back, but in the end I went because I enjoyed the music and had friends there, but the belief? It didn't come. Armistice Day parade—no. Cassock and surplice—no."[5] However, this is hard to reconcile with Patch's account (in the same volume) of an experience on the battlefield which Patch interpreted as his having been "allowed" to glimpse, for a moment, "the next world," and which convinced him "from that day . . . that death is not the end."[6]

However satisfying such narratives might be, and however compelling a dramatic trope, stories of universal loss of faith speak more of the sensibilities of later generations than they do of the direct, contemporary

2. Ibid.

3. Middlebrook, *First Day on the Somme*, 316.

4. Kew, "Great War's Damage."

5. Patch with van Emden, *Last Fighting Tommy*, 137; cf. 195.

6. Ibid., 94. See also the apparent continuing importance for Patch of devotional experiences at Combe Down (148–49) and Talbot House (200).

experience of those who witnessed the war at first-hand. Impressive though Middlebrook's endeavours certainly were, like Harry Patch his numerous interviewees spoke with the benefit (even handicap) of considerable hindsight, and even fifty years later, their views on the war often diverged, a fact illustrated by the nine other British survivors of the Somme quoted by Middlebrook at the end of his landmark book. And what an eventful and sobering experience that half-century had been: the Great Depression, the rise of Hitler, the Second World War, the advent of the atomic bomb, the Cold War, the Korean War, wars of decolonisation in Kenya, Malaya, and elsewhere, Suez, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and (more recently) the shocking spectacle of the first televised war unfolding in Vietnam. Well might one of Middlebrook's British survivors have said: "One's revulsion to the ghastly horrors of war was submerged in the belief that this war was to end all wars and Utopia would arise. What an illusion!"[7]

But no less illusory are the popular and academic myths that have clustered around the First World War and those who waged it. As "Tubby" Clayton protested in response to the avalanche of semi-fictionalised and sensationalised "war books" that appeared in the late 1920s, "fact and fiction do not after all mix easily. . . . Abolish the rules of the game; and enterprise, unchecked by the referee, will never cease to score."[8] Despite this warning, the interwar reaction to the carnage of 1914–18, of which the popularity of these "war books" was but a symptom, was rediscovered and enthusiastically amplified in the Cold War era—aided by the passing of a generation that would have taken understandable exception to the general portrayal of their lost sons and husbands as unthinking dupes and hapless cannon-fodder. What has resulted is a British national myth of 1914–18 that is often wildly at variance with demonstrable fact. Hence, for example, we have the 300 or so quasi-martyrs (a number that is oddly redolent of the total of Protestant martyrs burned by Mary Tudor) who were "shot at dawn" for military offences—clearly, it is assumed, the victims of a callous and remorseless process of military justice. In fact, these represented but one in ten of those who were actually sentenced to death by court martial, the remaining 90 percent never being executed, a statistic that indicates a prevailing culture of official clemency when it came to applying the harsh sanctions of military law.[9] Allied to these tragic figures (and, in the confused mythology of

7. Middlebrook, *First Day on the Somme*, 315.

8. "A Memorandum on the Book 'Retreat' by Instructor-Lieutenant-Commander C. R. Benstead MC, RN, Prepared by the Chaplain-General to the Forces for the Permanent Under-Secretary of State for War" (Museum of Army Chaplaincy, Amport House, Hampshire).

9. War Office, *Statistics*, 649.

the war, sometimes co-opted into their ranks)[10] is that of the conscientious objector—usually envisaged as a Quaker, or a Primitive Methodist—cruelly hounded by the authorities for his principled and prophetic stand against a terrible and futile war. Once again, however, this conjuration disregards the fact that, among the First World War's European belligerents, legal recognition of conscientious objection to combatant service was all but unique to Great Britain,[11] and that such was the popular basis of support for the war that even the Society of Friends had to grapple with the problem of hundreds of its young men who conscientiously chose to fight. Last, but by no means least, we have the overarching impression of "a lost generation" of British males wiped out on the Western Front, and of a whole generation of British females who were widowed or consigned to spinsterhood by the cruel vagaries of war. However, the figures tell a different and even uncomfortable story: one-third of eligible British males remained civilians, and nearly 90 percent of those who joined the army actually *survived* the war.[12]

And so it goes with the churches, and with British religion in general. If partly redeemed in national folklore by the poetry, prose, theology, and showmanship of Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy, the famous "Woodbine Willie" (introduced in the next chapter and featuring in the chapters that follow); by the fabled haven of rest that was Talbot House ("Every Man's Club") in Poperinghe;[13] and by the vaunted sacramental ministry of Roman Catholic priests in the trenches, this was otherwise a story of clerical hypocrisy, ecclesiastical inadequacy, and wholesale loss of religious faith. Very much part of the larger, black legend of the war, and understood as a major cause of the decline of British church life over subsequent decades, eventually it became an article of faith that the experience of the First World War had been a major causal factor—even *the* causal factor—in the decline of British Christianity over the twentieth century. Against the backdrop of a deepening Cold War and the misadventure of the Suez Crisis, in an early example of such reasoning, the famous Anglican worker-priest E. R. Wickham claimed in *Church and People in an Industrial City*:

> The war had its own devastating effects on the religious life of the nation. For the few, the more serious-minded, it increased scepticism at the same time that it fostered more serious occupation with the foundations of faith. And for these, as for the

10. Much to its credit, this is a myth that even the Peace Pledge Union is anxious to dispel: see http://www.ppu.org.uk/coproject/guide.html.

11. Robbins, "British Experience," 693.

12. Todman, *Great War*, 44; Middlebrook, *Your Country*, 134.

13. See further, Snape, ed., *Back Parts of War*, 161, 184–86, and 246.

> many, a reaction set in against "organized religion." . . . There is much evidence that the easy degeneration of the Almighty into the God of Battles and the British cause, though a reflection of the national struggle and in keeping with the national mood during the war, proved a further stone of stumbling and a further occasion for contempt, once the passions of war had cooled.[14]

For nearly sixty years, this verdict has been asserted and reasserted by historians, becoming a monocausal explanation for the decline of British Christianity that gained from rhetoric and repetition what it lacked in substance. In 1965, for example, A. J. P. Taylor declared in *English History 1914–1945* that: "the sight of priests and bishops blessing guns or tanks during the Great War was not a good advertisement for the gospel of the Prince of Peace," especially when intellectual and material progress had rendered society much "less concerned with pie in the sky."[15] A decade later, in his study of nonconformity and British politics, Stephen Koss pronounced that: "However much a commonplace, it is no exaggeration to say that war, when it came unexpectedly in August 1914, dealt a shattering blow to organised religion. The churches never recovered from the ordeal, either in terms of communicants or self-possession. Thereafter, men looked elsewhere, if anywhere, for their moral certainties."[16] As late as 2008, and with reference to falling church attendance in the inter-war years, Martin Pugh asserted the old truism that "The churches never really recovered from the role they had played as agents of official propaganda during the Great War."[17] So ingrained has this mythology of a popular reaction against the churches become that, in a recent study of global religion and the Great War, Philip Jenkins has aptly remarked that the war to end war has been didactically transformed into "a war to end faith."[18]

In demonstrating the decisive contribution of the First World War to the self-evident, long-term failure of the British churches, during the 1970s scholars increasingly turned to what they perceived as the salutary example of the Church of England. As the established church of the prime component of Great Britain, with its historic ties to the social, political, and military elite, and with the monarch as its supreme governor, the Church of England was easily cast as the chief culprit in the egregious ecclesiastical

14. Wickham, *Church and People*, 206.
15. Taylor, *English History*, 168–69.
16. Koss, *Nonconformity*, 125.
17. Pugh, *"We Danced All Night,"* 7.
18. Jenkins, *Great and Holy War*, 191.

blunder that was the churches' support for the First World War. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that this view had not prevailed up to that point. In 1952, for example, Stephens Spinks, editor of the *Hibbert Journal*, said in *Religion in Britain since 1900* that, during the First World War, "the bishops as a whole showed a sense of Christian restraint which was often, and sometimes violently, criticised by those whose passions under the stress of war overwhelmed their more compassionate feelings."[19] More than a decade later, Canon Roger Lloyd could still claim that England's national church had emerged with credit from the conflict, arguing that: "The impression which any fair-minded student of the evidence will get is that during the First World War the church was blessed with genuinely Christian and unusually wise episcopal leadership, and that hardly ever in history has Lambeth Palace played a more noble part than it did in those dreadful years."[20] In fact, as late as 1973, in an Open University textbook entitled *War, Peace and Religion*, Francis Clark maintained that, throughout the era of the two world wars, "the Church of England showed its perennial ability to survive and to adapt itself to changed circumstances. However unfavourably critics might speak of it, the national Church showed its vitality in many ways during the period we are considering." Significantly, Clark even saw its 1916 National Mission of Repentance and Hope ("a courageous failure or a misguided effort," according to Spinks)[21] as symptomatic of this "vitality," despite its obvious failure to induce a major religious revival among the nation at large.[22] Finally, the Church of England was in no sense exempted from Clark's assessment that "the clergy and members of the Churches were by no means the pious jingoists and ecclesiastical Colonel Blimps that some suppose."[23]

Nonetheless, a different tone prevailed by the late 1970s, for in the intervening years, a new generation of scholars, such as Albert Marrin, Alan Wilkinson, and Stuart Mews (in his widely read, if still unpublished, Cambridge doctoral thesis), had come forward to sift, weigh, and judge the statements and positions of Anglican leaders and thereby present an aggregate picture of uncertainty and failure.[24] In his book *The Last Crusade: The Church of England in the First World War* (1974), Albert Marrin argued that the war had "had a chastening influence upon church and nation," and

19. Spinks, *Religion in Britain*, 67.
20. Lloyd, *Church of England*, 222.
21. Spinks, *Religion in Britain*, 69.
22. Ferguson and Clark, *War, Peace and Religion*, 98.
23. Ibid., 114.
24. Lloyd, *Church of England*, 219 and 238.

that "the realization in later years that they had been taken in by propaganda as well as by their own predispositions induced a sense of shame and disappointment."[25] Although Marrin was roundly criticised by Owen Chadwick, one of the greatest church historians of his day, for indulging in "many adverse judgments against people or utterances," and for his presumption "that an authentic Christianity will be pacifist,"[26] Alan Wilkinson published a similar study four years later entitled *The Church of England and the First World War*. Now the best-known study of British religion in this era, Wilkinson reassured his readers that he had long "learnt to be critical of conventional patriotism," dismissing Lloyd's earlier verdict on the Church of England's wartime record as "over sanguine."[27] Though not as trenchant as Marrin, Wilkinson was strongly influenced by his literary and theological sources, and maintained that posterity had "the right and the duty to be critical" of the Church of England during the First World War, claiming that its failures were akin to those of the Cold War Church of England in its refusal to take a firm stand against nuclear weapons.[28] For his part, Mews adopted a somewhat broader perspective in his thesis, "Religion and English Society in the First World War," covering the English Free Churches as well as the Church of England, but his conclusions very much corresponded with those of Marrin and Wilkinson, arguing that "the First World War was a revelation of the extent to which the churches had lost their hold on society and it accelerated the process."[29] In subsequent years, this consensus was complemented and reinforced by David Thompson's research into the origins of the Church of England's 1916 National Mission of Repentance and Hope, whose very conception he found to be vague and confused,[30] and by Arlie Hoover's comparative study of the heady wartime preaching of British and German churchmen, boldly entitled *God, Germany, and Britain in the Great War: A Study in Clerical Nationalism* (1989). This strong current of highly judgmental pessimism also coloured a 2002 article by Shannon Ty Bontrager who, insouciantly billing the Church of England "the state church of an imperial nation," went on to extrapolate from a study of only two church periodicals that it ultimately failed in its craven and self-interested wartime bid "to gain status and power after a long period of losing them."[31] Even

25. Marrin, *Last Crusade,* 253.
26. Chadwick, review of *The Last Crusade*, 648.
27. Wilkinson, *Church of England*, xi and 1.
28. Ibid., 3–4.
29. Mews, "Religion and English Society," 339.
30. Thompson, "War, the Nation, and the Kingdom of God."
31. Bontrager, "Imagined Crusade," 774.

in 2016, and despite the growth of a strongly revisionist literature in the intervening years, this stream of criticism had by no means ceased, with the contents of wartime sermons still providing rich pickings for sharp critics of the Church of England's wartime record.[32]

Whether or not one shares the moral indignation that drives much of this scholarship, there are some serious methodological problems with its heavy and selective reliance on published sources and on the opinions and activities of the Church of England's clerical and lay elites. First, in focusing exclusively on the opinions and reactions of the church's leading figures, its exponents simply ignored popular religious attitudes and behaviour. Albert Marrin, for example, freely conceded that he had "had to rely heavily on printed sources," especially published sermons and on the national church press. In fact, he confessed to having little patience with manuscript sources—which, he bizarrely claimed, were "unfortunately less full and less available than in other areas of English history"—and frankly disdained diocesan and parish publications, which were simply "dull and packed with local small talk."[33] Although Alan Wilkinson's *The Church of England and the First World War* also drew heavily on published sources, it did not ignore the humble parish magazine entirely, surveying the experience of a single Cheshire parish in a book of more than 300 pages.[34] Secondly, this heavy reliance on published sources (national church periodicals, printed sermons, and more heavyweight religious commentary) led to some misleading conclusions, as some critically important published texts had important agendas that remained ignored. For example, the findings of *The Army and Religion* report of 1919 were largely taken at face value by Marrin and Wilkinson, rather than understood more critically as a highly selective body of evidence in favour of a particular agenda for post-war church reform—as Mews correctly deduced from his more extensive study of manuscript sources.[35] In addition, some of these works happily rehearsed the notorious story of the bishop of London, Arthur Foley Winnington-Ingram, who purportedly urged his listeners to slaughter Germans in what Adrian Gregory has described as "the most infamous sermon in Anglican history."[36] Significantly, recent research by Stuart Bell into the transmission of this tale has shown that the accepted construction of this sermon appears to have been

32. Barbeau, "Christian Empire."

33. Marrin, *Last Crusade*, ix.

34. Wilkinson, *Church of England*, 58–62, 191–92, and 297.

35. Ferguson and Clark, *War, Peace and Religion*, 95; Marrin, *Last Crusade*, 203–5; Wilkinson, *Church of England*, 160–65; Mews, "Religion and English Society," 174.

36. Gregory, *Last Great War*, 168.

the work of a secularist propagandist, George Bedborough, who sought to ride the pacifist tide of the mid-1930s by publishing a doctored compilation of clerical declarations on the First World War, under the incriminating title *Arms and the Clergy*. Moreover, and in a remarkable gesture of academic magnanimity, the populariser of this story, Roland Bainton, repudiated his original account of Winnington-Ingram's sermon in an issue of the journal *Theology*.[37]

If the conduct and reputation of the Church of England has been unduly savaged by historians, studies of other Christian traditions have usually followed the same lines. While focusing on specific denominations, or denominational families, they have shared the emphasis on church leadership that has characterised the historiography of the Church of England, while also stressing the supposedly toxic effects of war on organised religion. As Edwardian England's second largest church constituency, interest has naturally focused on the English Free Churches, an evolving body of Protestant denominations that had customarily defined themselves against the state and the established Church of England. These "nonconformist" churches also included the Society of Friends, England's historic citadel of Christian pacifism. In the context of the 1970s narrative, the hallowed traditions of the nonconformist churches were compromised by the Free Churches' general and close alignment with the national war effort between 1914 and 1918, their decline throughout most of the decades that followed the First World War being assured by this tragic and catastrophic lapse. According to Mews's scathing perspective on one significant "milestone" in the history of English nonconformity: "On 16 November, King George V and Queen Mary attended a Free Church thanksgiving service to mark the end of the war. . . . Free Churchmen could only comfort themselves with the crumbs of royal patronage which marked their acceptance or toleration by an establishment which no longer had reason to fear them."[38] In 1986, Alan Wilkinson surveyed the impact of both world wars on English Christianity in *Dissent or Conform? War, Peace and the English Churches 1900–1945*. Characteristically viewing his subjects through the prism of literature, theology, and history, Wilkinson endorsed the view that nonconformity's support for the First World War had been a damning experience, concluding that "the close identification of Nonconformity with the war effort was contrary to some of its deepest instincts. . . . This identification therefore led to a destructive confusion in its own mind and that of others as to what it

37. Bell, "Malign or Maligned?" 127–29; Bainton, Letter to the Editor.

38. Mews, "Religion and English Society," 334.

really stood for now."[39] Twenty years later, Alan Ruston captured the enduring scholarly consensus as to the impact of the First World War on the English Free Churches: "The Great, or First World War, saw the Nonconformist churches become more a part of the establishment than they had ever been before, particularly in attitude. They became an integral element within the political machine in almost the same terms as the established church [of England]. But flying into the sun in this way burnt their wings and like Icarus they fell to the sea. They did not drown like Icarus but the weakness engendered by the war remained with them for the rest of the century."[40]

Again, studies of Scottish Presbyterianism (whether established or non-established) and Scottish and Welsh nonconformity have usually reflected the dominant emphasis on leading personalities and institutional affairs.[41] And they have also largely echoed the judgments that have prevailed elsewhere. For example, in a seminal study in 1994 of the established Church of Scotland and the United Free Church in the First World War, Stewart Brown lamented the effects of the conflict, asserting that "the wartime expressions of Presbyterian ministers and academics, concerning the elevating effects of the war as religious crusade or the promise of a new, more just social order, would haunt the Church with a sense of loss and shame during the troubled years that followed."[42] Likewise, and surveying the impact of war on predominantly nonconformist Wales, Densil Morgan found that this was, at best, "ambiguous." While they willingly cast aside what Spinks termed "their puritan-pacifist traditions,"[43] Welsh nonconformists were distinctly disappointed in their hopes for a religious revival, and even before the war had run its course had realised that "postwar Wales would be a new, strange Wales, where the old values would be put aside and Christianity be increasingly regarded as an anachronism."[44] Furthermore, Robert Pope has stressed that the political strains of war, and especially the introduction of conscription by a Liberal-led government in 1916, overriding the qualms and even opposition of Welsh nonconformists, signalled the end of the "nonconformist conscience" as a political force in the principality and elsewhere in Britain.[45]

39. Wilkinson, *Dissent or Conform?* 54.

40. Ruston, "Protestant Nonconformist Attitudes," 240.

41. Brown, "Piety, Gender and War"; Hendry, "Scottish Baptists"; MacLeod, "'Mighty Hand of God'" and "'Own Little Share of Service'"; Matheson, "Scottish War Sermons"; Morgan, *Span of the Cross*, 41–77.

42. Brown, "'Solemn Purification,'" 102.

43. Spinks, *Religion in Britain*, 68.

44. Morgan, *Span of the Cross*, 76.

45. Pope, "Christ and Caesar?"

Nevertheless, and despite its currency, there are two major problems with the scholarly consensus that identified religious decline with the baleful consequences of the First World War. First, the case of Roman Catholicism in mainland Britain clearly defied the dominant trope of calamitous misjudgment and inevitable redundancy. In Marrin's opinion, the Roman Catholic Church was "universally recognized as doing splendid work" during the war,[46] and Mews has concurred that the First World War was a "good" war for British Catholicism.[47] However, the Catholic hierarchies of England and Scotland were no less zealous in their support for the war than were the leaders of the principal Protestant churches (Quakers excepted), a stand that was patently at odds with the neutrality of Pope Benedict XV.[48] As Keith Robbins has rightly emphasised, the singular demographics of English, Scottish, and Welsh Catholicism—and not least the fact that "the Roman Catholic Church included more non-native born in its ranks than any other church"[49]—fed strong, ultra-patriotic instincts among leading Catholics, feelings that were born of centuries of marginalisation and a firm determination to become part of the national mainstream. Moreover, despite its wartime record of yielding to no one in patriotic fervour, the Catholic Church grew in the 1920s and 1930s, due to natural increase, conversions, and immigration from Ireland. These factors effectively forestalled attempts to condemn its wartime leadership along the lines of their Protestant counterparts and underlined the fact that far more was at work in influencing the fortunes of the churches in the inter-war period than reactions and recriminations over the war itself.

The consensus formed in the 1970s was, secondly, undermined by the emergence of a new chronology of the secularisation (or "dechristianisation") of British society, one that has cast its underlying assumptions into question. Through a greater use of qualitative rather than quantitative evidence, and based on the revolutionary premise that "what made Britain Christian was not levels of churchgoing but the way in which Christianity infused public culture and was adopted by individuals, whether churchgoers or not, in forming their own identities,"[50] a new chronology has argued that the secularisation of British society was not a consequence of industrialisation and urbanisation ("the long, inevitable religious decline of the conventional secularisation story," as Callum Brown put it) but "a remarkably

46. Marrin, *Last Crusade*, 203.
47. Mews, "Religious Life," 452.
48. Snape, "British Catholicism."
49. Robbins, *England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales*, 115.
50. Brown, *Death of Christian Britain*, 8.

sudden and culturally violent event" triggered by the cultural upheavals of the "long" 1960s.[51] Consequently, and with reference to the First World War, Brown has contended that "much of what British churchmen at the time characterised as loss of faith was actually loss of Edwardian reverence for social authority, for obedience to the clergy. The class system was changing, but popular Christian faith still retained resilience."[52] Significantly, Keith Robbins has also come to the conclusion that the war caused no significant changes to the religious landscape of Great Britain, and certainly did not cause any seismic shifts that led to its collapse. As Robbins has put it, the truth was much more prosaic: "the war had brought neither a general revival of religion nor a mass alienation from it."[53] More recently, and through the interrogation of masses of statistical data, Clive Field has demonstrated the survival of a robust and resilient religious culture in Great Britain throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Although subscribing to a gradualist rather than a revolutionary model of religious change, Field has shown that during and after the First World War, the British churches were more affected by the simple disruption of peacetime norms and routines than they were by any mass rejection of Christianity and the churches.[54] Moreover, Field has concluded that the decline in church membership and public religious practice in the inter-war years should be understood as a function of gradual and longstanding social change, especially the ever-increasing availability of Sunday leisure opportunities, than of "any great 'crisis of faith'" occasioned by the war.[55] In other words, the humdrum attractions of the wireless, the cinema, and the charabanc in inter-war Britain proved a much deadlier cocktail for the churches than the aggregate effects of Gallipoli, the Somme, and Passchendaele. Significantly, in 2011, Simon Green expressed a justified scepticism over the much-vaunted religious impact of the First World War, whether proclaimed by "engaged professionals" or "detached historians," concluding that:

> Surviving organisational statistics point to no sharp break in the pattern of associational membership, worshipful attendance, financial contributions or even popular adherence to the sanctity of the rites of passage, after 1918. . . . Similarly, there was no sign, at least no visible sign, to suggest that all of a sudden "the people" ceased to believe in God, the devil, the after-life and the ultimate

51. Ibid., 175–76 and 188.
52. Brown, *Religion and Society*, 112.
53. Robbins, *England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales*, 157.
54. Field, "Keeping the Spiritual Home Fires Burning."
55. Field, "Gradualist or Revolutionary Secularization?" 91–93.

> triumph of good over evil. . . . Some, hyper-sophisticated minds no doubt did have their confidence in a transcendental order of justice shattered by the events of the Great War. But most, it would seem, did not.[56]

Green's verdict reflects that of a body of scholarship that has been growing over the past decade, one that illustrates that a great deal needs to be re-thought. As with so much of the revisionist scholarship on the First World War, this began with the study of the British army. Through more systematic use of manuscript sources, and especially personal materials held in repositories such as the Department of Documents at the Imperial War Museum and the Liddle Collection at the University of Leeds, the religious experience of the British soldier in the First World War was dramatically reappraised.[57] This process of reassessment had the effect of revealing the resilience—even the vitality—of the religious culture (or cultures) from which Britain's soldiers were drawn. Naturally enough, the reality of a highly pluralistic religious culture, to say nothing of the sheer size and diversity of the army, was reflected in a spectrum of individual religious reactions to the war. These responses could evolve over decades rather than years and they inevitably melded with experiences in civilian life. Significantly, the voice of protest atheism was that of a remarkably small minority.[58] The missionary vigour of the churches, which was so much a characteristic of Victorian religion, was likewise reflected in the army throughout the First World War. More than five thousand British clergymen served as commissioned chaplains during the conflict, representing a system of chaplaincy provision whose scale was unmatched by any other army.[59] Far from being the malingering milksops of popular lore, the Anglican chaplains among them were the pick of the Anglican clergy, winning hundreds of awards for courage in the front line, including three Victoria Crosses.[60] A hidden story that has also emerged from this new body of research is that of the many hundreds of clergymen from the Protestant churches who volunteered to serve as ordinary officers and soldiers, as combatants and non-combatants.[61] Unjustly forgotten by the churches they represented, they included a fourth (Anglican) recipient of the Victoria Cross, namely Bernard William Vann,

56. Green, *Passing of Protestant England,* 61–62.

57. Schweitzer, "Cross and the Trenches" and *Cross and the Trenches*; Snape, *God and the British Soldier*.

58. Snape, *Revisiting Religion*.

59. War Office, *Statistics*, 235; Snape and Madigan, eds., *Clergy in Khaki*.

60. Snape, "Church of England Army Chaplains"; Madigan, *Faith under Fire*.

61. Madigan, "'Their Cross to Bear."

who, until his death barely a month before the armistice, combined his functions as an infantry officer with those of a chaplain.[62]

But these reappraisals do not end with the compelling figure of the British soldier, for the war produced a massive boom in Christian philanthropy that was expressed in a huge variety of ways. Reflected at local level in parish or congregational support for the Red Cross, Belgian refugees, or those being cared for by a priest or minister in khaki, these powerful currents of philanthropy converged at a national level in the endeavours of (among others) the Church Army, the Salvation Army, and the Catholic Women's League. Most impressive, however, was the multi-faceted war work of the Young Men's Christian Association, an enterprise that channelled the efforts of hundreds of civilian clergy, many thousands of lay volunteers, and millions of individual benefactors into what was one of the greatest philanthropic endeavours in British history.[63] If the impressive efforts of the non-denominational YMCA have remained, until recently, strikingly neglected, the denominational orientation of most of the literature on religion and the First World War has also served to obscure the efforts of non-denominational Bible agencies, whose colossal wartime distributions underlined the abiding importance of the Bible, whether as text or artefact, in contemporary British society.[64] As Spinks remarked from the relatively unclouded perspective of the early 1950s, and despite the predictable hand-wringing over the religious state of the British soldier (basically, the British working man in arms): "Letters from men serving in the Middle East testified to the effect which Palestine had upon men who had given up religion when they left Sunday School. The Bible, particularly the New Testament, came to life; here was Bethlehem, the Sea of Galilee, the Holy City, the Garden and the Tomb, and if much of what they saw was unhistorical, yet the total impression was profound. Their letters showed how much the life of the British people was rooted in the Authorized Version."[65]

While the nature of civilian philanthropy demonstrates the close elision, rather than separateness, of the home and fighting fronts, scholarly scrutiny of the religious effects of the First World War on British civilians has begun to generate the kind of national and local studies that have so illuminated our understanding of religious continuity and change in other pivotal periods of Britain's religious history.[66] Though in its early stages,

62. Beresford, *Christian Soldier*.
63. Snape, ed., *Back Parts of War*.
64. Snape, "Bible, the British and the First World War."
65. Spinks, *Religion in Britain*, 69.
66. Gregory, *Last Great War*, 152–86; Gregory and Becker, "Religious Sites"; Beaken,

this ongoing audit once again seems favourable, with little being unearthed to demonstrate a clear and conscious falling away from the churches, and much being adduced that illustrates their abiding significance, dynamism, and adaptability. In the latter respect, the rapid assimilation of prayers for the dead in the Church of England—and even in nonconformist and Scottish Presbyterian circles—underlines the pastoral and theological responsiveness of large swathes of British Christianity, and throws into question an older contention that the Protestant churches stood impotent and forlorn amidst mass mortality and a surging tide of popular spiritualism (which, as Georgina Byrne has pointed out, was more closely related to traditional Christianity than many historians have actually realised).[67] This new and more favourable image of British religion and the First World War goes a long way towards explaining an otherwise glaring evidential anomaly. If the religious and moral capital of organised Christianity, and of the established churches in particular, had been so egregiously squandered during the First World War, how could orthodox Christianity have exerted such a powerful, immediate, and defining influence on the new, post-war culture of remembrance? From the tomb of the "unknown warrior" in Westminster Abbey (the brainchild of Anglican chaplain David Railton), to the architectural motifs of Britain's war cemeteries and the personal epitaphs marking hundreds of thousands of soldiers' graves, the relevance and resilience of Christianity in the post-war years was, quite literally, set in stone.[68]

Accompanied by these ongoing developments in the historiography of the war and British religion, the centenary of the First World War provides an ideal context for a collection of essays such as this. It is, of course, entirely fitting that this should emanate from the cathedral at Worcester, given Worcester's close association with the perennially fascinating figure of Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy, and that an afterword should be offered by Ilse Junkermann, bishop of a German diocese and city that has been proverbially associated with the horror and brutality of war since it was sacked in 1631, at the height of the Thirty Years' War. Furthermore, its contributors have brought fresh perspectives to bear on familiar figures and themes while opening new fields of enquiry and reflection, ranging from the legacy of the war for Anglican social thought to its influence on the evolution of

Church of England; Austin, *"Like a Swift Hurricane"*; Bell, "Church and the First World War," "'Soldiers of Christ Arise,'" and "Faith in Conflict."

67. Cannadine, "War and Death"; Wilkinson, "Changing English Attitudes"; Snape, "Civilians, Soldiers and Perceptions"; Byrne, *Modern Spiritualism*.

68. Snape, *Revisiting Religion*, 31–32. For a thoughtful and wide-ranging exposition of the Christian iconography of memorialisation, see Hammond, "British Great War Remembrance."

humanitarianism. Scholars and interested readers in many fields will find its essays enriching and illuminating, while the range of its authors' perspectives on the war itself speaks candidly of the variety of responses that the conflict evokes in Britain today. Although too often forgotten or ignored in the past, the religious experience of this conflict was inevitably diverse and multi-faceted, and this volume is a testimony to that complex but critical reality.