

Religion (USA)

By [Jonathan H. Ebel](#)

Summary

This article charts the contours of the Great War as an American religious experience, focusing on the ways in which the study of religion and the Great War in America forces an examination of what is meant by “religion.” American clergy and American soldiers, through their rhetoric and their actions, forged and practiced a type of religion that fused war’s physical experiences with metaphysical meanings, and joined the national to the divine. This religion flourished in the interwar period and continues to shape so-called civil religious discourse and practice to this day.

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Introduction

The study of religion in Great War-era [America](#), specifically the interaction of [religious belief](#) and war experiences in that period, is, to paraphrase the American theologian [Reinhold Niebuhr \(1892-1971\)](#), a study in humanity’s inability to transcend the historical moment even with the aid of discourses and traditions that claim transcendence. Niebuhr was the pastor of Bethel Evangelical Church in Detroit, Michigan when the United States entered the war. He felt the pull of [nationalism](#), the romance of service, and the power of the uniform even though he got no closer to the fighting than Camp Funston in Kansas. He wrote after touring Funston in 1918 and meeting several army chaplains, “It is the uniform and not the cross which impresses me and others. I am impressed even when I know that I ought not be.”¹ The vast majority of Americans were similarly impressed by “the uniform” and by connections easily forged between it and more traditional religious symbols.

Shortly after the Armistice and in light of negotiations at [Versailles](#), Niebuhr concluded that the war had cost the warring nations far more than it would ever benefit them or the wider world. Concluding that the virtues of the Allied powers were artifice, he threw in his lot with ecumenical [pacifist](#) movements in the 1920s.² This, in a nutshell, is the way that the war and religious aspects of it have been portrayed in American religious historiography.³ Extreme religious enthusiasm and passionate nationalism gave way to disillusion, malaise, even depression. Clergy and others filled the bubble of wartime enthusiasm with their jingoistic hot air, and then felt chastened when, rather abruptly, the bubble burst.

This characterization fails to gauge the war's influence on 20th century America. It also greatly underestimates the strength of the religious-nationalist alloy forged in wartime America. Niebuhr may have begun the war as an optimist verging on sentimentality and left it a skeptic battling cynicism, but Niebuhr's experience was neither representative nor normative. American soldiers certainly exhibited a shared enthusiasm for war and associated experiences, and this enthusiasm continued to animate [veterans' organizations](#) in post-war America. Mainline denominations looked back on the war and its lessons with much of the same enthusiasm that characterized their anticipation of it. Some dissenting denominations and [conscientious objectors](#) stand in sharp contrast to these experiences, albeit on a small scale.⁴ Other erstwhile pacifists and pacifist denominations shaped their teachings regarding nations, war, and killing to match those of the churches that rallied to the flag. This narrowing of the pacifist community prompted [Jane Addams \(1860-1935\)](#) to remark, "The force of the majority was so overwhelming that it seemed not only impossible to hold one's own against it, but at moments absolutely unnatural, and one secretly yearned to participate in 'the folly of mankind.'"⁵

Religion and America's War Aims

President [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#) was the son of a pro-slavery Presbyterian minister and the product of a Calvinist heritage. It should be no surprise, then, that his wartime rhetoric was shot through with religious imagery and terminology, especially the biblical language of covenant. Derived from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament and refracted through the theopolitics and ecclesiastical politics of Calvinism, invocations of covenantal rhetoric were a regular feature of Wilsonian patriotism and international cooperation.

In his second inaugural address, delivered on 5 March 1917, Wilson proposed that national unity ought to emerge from within and that faith in the nation should order the passions and actions of all men. "Let each man see to it that the dedication is in his own heart, the high

purpose of the nation in his own mind, ruler of his own will and desire.”⁶ Likewise, in an address to the American Federation of Labor on 17 November 1917, Wilson averred that “If our men have not self-control, then they are not capable of that great thing which we call democratic government.” He therefore called upon Americans to “not only take common counsel, but yield to and obey common counsel.”⁷ It wasn’t enough for Americans to stand together; they needed to be unified in will and desire by devotion to the nation. When Wilson looked beyond the war he hoped for a world drawn “together in some common covenant, some genuine and practical cooperation.”⁸ Victory alone was not sufficient. Victory had to bring a covenanted peace.

Wilson did not seek to wage a holy war. He did not aspire to rule as a theocrat. His rhetoric shows the back-and-forth flow of the “religious” and the “political,” the difficulty involved in charting where one stops and the other begins. A similar challenge emerged further down the chain-of-command, where religion and experiences of war were often tightly interwoven.

A good case in point is the experience of [Rolland Romack \(18-1918\)](#), a convert to the Pentecostal movement in its earliest years, who was drafted into the army in 1917. Pentecostal teaching about the coming end times and the necessity of experiencing baptism in the Holy Spirit made patriotism a ridiculous emotion and killing for the nation an atrocious sin. Soldiering was idolatrous service to a temporal and soon-to-vanish power; taking another soldier’s life before he could be baptized in the spirit consigned him to hell. Romack and his friend [Fred Campbell](#) petitioned for conscientious objector status based on these beliefs. Their pastor and mentor, [Charles Parham \(1873-1929\)](#), wrote on their behalf, “we have taught that the true Christian must not fight for ‘he that taketh the sword shall perish with the sword.’...It is hard for those who sincerely believe that we are nearing the end of this age...to fight for the perpetuation of nations.”⁹ Their petitions were denied and both were drafted.

Romack served in [France](#) and wrote home describing his thoughts, “I have no fear in my heart for the things I am coming up against, and if sinners can give their lives for the country and the world’s freedom, I, prepared to meet my God – ought the more freely to yield my life.”¹⁰ Romack was killed in action on 13 September 1918 prompting a eulogy from Parham, “When the call of the draft came, he went forth as grandly to be a hero for the flag he loved, as he had been of the cross. Without reserve he laid down his life upon the altar of his country...As did the Master; for those who compelled him to go the mile, he gladly went the twain.”¹¹ Not only had the war been an occasion for Romack, Campbell, and Parham to rethink their patterns of religious practice (military service vs. non-service), it also prompted

them to revise their theology to the point that death in war became both a sacrifice on “the altar of his country” and an imitation of Christ.

Military Chaplains

A great many American clergy were enthusiastic supporters of the war effort from the moment the United States entered the war. Some, such as the great revivalist-entertainer [Billy Sunday \(1862-1935\)](#), used religious jingoism and theatrics to rally support. Others, such as Father [Francis Duffy \(1871-1932\)](#) of New York’s famed Fighting Sixty-Ninth and Reverend [Frederick Beekman \(1871-1964\)](#) of the American Cathedral, Church of the Holy Trinity, in Paris worked in a more pastoral register. Using both of these sources of energy, America’s mainline denominations worked diligently and cooperatively to support servicemen and the overall war effort.¹²

The most obvious outlet for their energies and their personnel was the military chaplaincy, a disorganized and poorly regarded organization through much of the half century that separated the Civil War from the Great War.¹³ Protestant and Catholic leaders worked together to professionalize the chaplaincy, taking a more active role in choosing candidates and being far more selective than they had been in previous decades. General [John J. Pershing \(1860-1948\)](#) appointed Charles H. Brent (1862-1929) as Chief of Chaplains of the [American Expeditionary Force](#) (A.E.F.) on 1 May 1918, though Brent had been acting in something akin to that capacity since January of that year.¹⁴ Brent, a respected and learned Episcopal bishop, became a tireless and fair-minded advocate of the chaplaincy, pointing out in official correspondence the travesty of sending men to fight and die for the country without the ministrations they received at home. When American troops first arrived in France the intended ratio of soldiers to chaplains was 3600:1. Through Brent’s work the target ratio was lowered to 1200:1.¹⁵

Reviving and strengthening trends of cooperation and cross-denominational support that had begun during the American Civil War, the A.E.F. chaplaincy was characterized by practical and pastoral ecumenism. The politics of the churches involved in the chaplaincy dissolved in favor of a military bureaucracy in which an Episcopal bishop superintended Congregationalists and Baptists, Presbyterians and Methodists, Lutherans, Catholics, and Jews. There was no room in this hierarchy for disputes over theology, authority, or the sacraments. Moreover, there were never enough chaplains to ensure that soldiers could worship with chaplains of their own denomination. Cross-denominational cooperation thus became the rule rather than the exception. This system, not to mention soldiers’ interactions with religious “others,” reduced the significance of denominational distinctions at a time

when ecumenism was on the rise on the home front as well.

Religious agencies such as the Young Men's Christian Association ([YMCA](#)), the Knights of Columbus (K of C), and the Salvation Army maintained a strong presence among the soldiers, providing reminders of home and some of home's comforts and distractions. YMCA and K of C huts could be used for worship services, but they also served as organizing points for entertainment and athletics, venues for reading and writing letters home, and as canteens for the sale and distribution of chocolate and cigarettes. Religion was thus present in the soldier's experience in recognizable forms and institutions, but those institutions themselves were evidence of the breadth of "religion" in the world of the soldier.

Religion among American Soldiers

The religious lives of American soldiers were, of course, connected to some degree to the chaplains with whom they served and the religious service organizations that supported them. Some soldiers appreciated these ministrations, while others did not. Some involved themselves in the religious services, while others stayed away. There is little evidence to suggest that the war short-circuited or reconfigured soldiers' denominational identities or caused them to flee to or from religious institutions. What is clear is that the men who fought the war looked upon it as a religious endeavor in itself, and found in the anticipation, the experience, and the memory of combat, moments that not only bound them together, but also gave them access to ultimate truths and a firm basis on which to build political, religious, and cultural authority. This wartime dynamic emerges from soldiers' writings about themselves and about chaplains, as well as from the pages of the [Stars and Stripes](#). Their thoughts converge around the belief that one who has encountered combat has seen and known a truer truth about man and God than one who has not.¹⁶

American soldiers encountered "religion" in the person of the chaplain, the sacred space of [churches](#) (some abandoned, some not), the experience of worship, and the pages of scripture. In these ways they were similar to many American women and men. These were, however, not the only figures and venues, experiences and writings in which they found meaning. Indeed, each of these obviously "religious" elements had a less obviously religious counterpart through which soldiers ordered their lives and with which they expressed their faith. A chaplain's religious authority had been established and verified by his denomination. The battle-tested soldier, an authority equal to or surpassing the chaplain, had been authorized and verified by exposure to combat and by a demonstrated willingness to suffer and die for his friends, the nation, and the world. In wartime and its aftermath, the combat veteran was constructed as a religious authority. Churches served as sacred spaces for some soldiers; far more gathered in clearings and fields for open-air services or in explicitly multi-

purpose YMCA and K of C huts. Sacred spaces expanded in the war; so too did the range of sacred activities. The YMCA saw itself as performing a religious duty by giving soldiers an outlet for athletic energies, an occasion for laughter, or stationary on which write to their mothers. Would it be strange if soldiers themselves saw these activities – maintaining connections with the domestic sphere in general and their mothers in particular, gathering with fellow soldier to play baseball – as religious?

The social and ritual experience of worship mattered a great deal to some soldiers regardless of the venue. But if soldiers' writings are to be believed, the experience of military service, of shared suffering, even of combat took on a strongly religious valence. They wrote repeatedly of war's reduction of life to its basics, war's power to reveal men for what they were at their core. They wrote of war's eloquence as a teacher on questions of createdness, dependence, and human impotence.¹⁷ Stories of Bible-toting soldiers are not as common in the literature of America's Great War experience as they are in the Civil War, though we should not take this as indicative of biblical illiteracy or lack of interest. The decidedly non-scriptural *Stars and Stripes* with a peak circulation of over 500,000 copies was produced by and for soldiers and, while brimming with straightforward [journalism](#), also gave consistent attention to the task of interpreting the war through scripture and interpreting scripture through the war.

The Great War and the Study of Religion in America

The study of religion in Great War-era America forces questions at the heart of the discipline of religious studies: What is religion? Where does it begin and end? The easy and often quite satisfactory response to these questions involves the listing of traditions—Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism – and their sub-traditions – Reform, Conservative, Orthodox; Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant; Sunni, Shia, etc., and the tacit understanding that what happens beyond these bodies is “secular” or not religion.¹⁸

The wartime American context presents myriad challenges to this schema. First, a dizzying array of traditions, sub-traditions, and sub-sub-traditions creates such a range of beliefs and practices to consider as “religion” that the territory marked out as purely secular all but vanishes. Second, many wartime behaviors that it makes sense to at least consider as “religious” (embodied demonstrations of ultimate allegiance to the nation, for instance) are only loosely related to the major religious traditions, falling instead into the realm of civil religion or religious nationalism. Finally, men and women from the top to the bottom of American society forged and perpetuated discourses that explicitly blended the religious and the martial, finding in war moments of revelation, expressions of religious belief, and the working out of salvation.

Any attempt to take the measure of the role of religion in the American war experience must do more than follow chaplains and Bible-toting soldiers from Fort Dix to the Meuse-Argonne. American Christians blended American and Christian myth, symbols, and history as they blended sacred and secular work, rhetoric, and ideas. This mixing was evident from the very top of the American chain of command down to the most junior enlisted personnel, from revivalist clergy in the United States to Episcopal ministers in Paris.

Conclusion

Life and death in war bound men together; it complicated traditional understandings of authority, sacred space, and scripture. Studying the Great War as an American religious experience forces one to reckon with the messiness not only of common analytical categories but also of individual and communal lives. Woodrow Wilson deftly blended religious and political rhetoric; American chaplains worked in an environment defined by religious mixing; American soldiers lived in the midst of this heterogeneous environment and themselves wove together the religious and the martial.

Indeed, the war inspired American soldiers to institutionalize those sentiments and to keep alive the religious memory of those experiences. This was the founding purpose of the American Legion, organized in March of 1919 by American veterans of the Great War. The Legion sought to serve and worship the nation as many Americans hoped to serve and worship God. In a time of increasing rancor among American clergymen it was a bastion of religious tolerance, provided that men and women of faith taught the acceptability of devoted service to the United States. The Legion's well-documented hostility toward pacifists, anarchists, communists, socialists, and labor organizers certainly grew from multiple sources, but was arguably a kind of religious violence, an attempt to purge heretics from a nation that, in Wilson's words, demanded an outward devotion springing from a faith held deep within.

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Notes

1. Niebuhr, Reinhold: *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, Louisville et al. 1990 [1929], p. 19. ↑
2. Niebuhr, *Leaves* 1990, p. 24. ↑
3. See Abrams, Ray A.: *Preachers Present Arms. A Study of the War-Time Attitudes and Activities of the Churches and the Clergy in the United States, 1914-1918*, Philadelphia 1933. ↑
4. Kosek, Joseph Kip: *Acts of Conscience. Christian Nonviolence and Modern American*

Democracy, New York 2009. ↑

5. Addams, Jane: "Personal Reactions During War," in: Lynd, Staughton/Lynd, Alice (eds.): Nonviolence in America. A Documentary History, Maryknoll 2002, p. 95. ↑
6. Leonard Arthur R. (ed.): War Addresses of Woodrow Wilson, Boston 1918, p. 31. ↑
7. Leonard, War Addresses 1918, p. 75. ↑
8. Leonard, War Addresses 1918, p. 49. ↑
9. Parham, Sarah: The Life of Charles Parham. Founder of the Apostolic Faith Movement, New York 1985, pp. 273-274. ↑
10. Parham, The Life of Charles 1985, p. 277. ↑
11. Parham, The Life of Charles 1985, p. 276. ↑
12. Piper, John F.: The American Churches in World War I, Athens, Ohio 1985. ↑
13. Budd, Richard M.: Serving Two Masters. The Development of the American Military Chaplaincy, 1860-1920, Lincoln 2002. ↑
14. Budd, Serving Two Masters 2002, pp. 125-129. ↑
15. Ebel, Jonathan H.: "The Great War, Religious Authority, and the American Fighting Man," in: Church History. Studies in Christianity and Culture 78/1 (2009), pp. 99-133. ↑
16. Ebel, Jonathan H.: Faith in the Fight. Religion and the American Soldier in the Great War, Princeton 2010. ↑
17. Ibid. ↑
18. For additional work on the expansiveness of religion as a category see: Smith, Jonathan Z.: Imagining Religion. From Babylon to Jonestown, Chicago 1982; Lincoln, Bruce: Holy Terrors. Thinking About Religion After September 11, Chicago 2003; Sullivan, Winnifred Fallers: The Impossibility of Religious Freedom, Princeton 2005. ↑

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- [Gamble, Richard M.: **The war for righteousness. Progressive Christianity, the**](#)

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External Links

- **[Addams, Jane: Personal Reactions during War \(Pfeiffer University\) \(Book\)](#)**
- **[Ebel, Jonathan H.: The Great War, Religious Authority, and the American Fighting Man, in: Church History 78/01, March 2009, pp. 99-133 \(Cambridge University Press\) \(Article\)](#)**
- **[Knights of Columbus Museum \(Institutional Website\)](#)**

- [Leonard, Arthur Roy: War addresses of Woodrow Wilson, 1918 \(Internet Archive\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Niebuhr, Reinhold: Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic \(Internet Archive\) \(Article\)](#)
- [The Stars and Stripes Newspaper \(Library of Congress\) \(Database\)](#)

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