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Daniel Reynaud

Avondale College of Higher Education, daniel.reynaud@avondale.edu.au

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Revisiting the Secular Anzac: the Anzacs and Religion

Daniel Reynaud¹

One of the ‘givens’ of the Anzac myth is that by and large the Australian soldier was not interested in religion. Historian Bill Gammage, in his pioneering and influential study of the Anzacs, read the letters and diaries of a thousand Australian Imperial Force (A.I.F.) soldiers and, finding few references to religion or the padres, ‘concluded that the Australian soldier was indifferent to religion’.² As an extension of the general belief that Australians, particularly Australian men, are not religious, it is *de rigueur* that the celebrated epitome of Australianness, the Anzac, should be a secular figure. Many histories, beginning with the official works by C. E. W. Bean, himself the son of a clergyman, have spoken of the Anzac soldier in purely secular terms, and the Anzac legend has achieved something of the status of a secular religion, complete with its own holy day, Anzac Day, which has assumed a sacredness to rival Christmas Day; a national temple, the cathedral-like War Memorial in Canberra; and many RSL halls for regular meetings of the elect;

¹ Daniel Reynaud is Associate Professor in History at Avondale College of Higher Education in New South Wales.

² Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years: Australian Soldiers in the Great War* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1974), xiv. See also Michael McKernan, *Australian Churches at War: Attitudes and Activities of the Major Churches 1914-1918* (Sydney & Canberra: Catholic Theology Faculty and Australian War Memorial, 1980), 134.

as well as a plethora of monuments and memorials in most cities, towns and hamlets around the country.³ The lack of interest in religion is often assumed to be a distinctively Australian characteristic, as are many other supposedly unique qualities of the Anzac. In this regard, the Anzac legend is a useful way of defining the ideal modern Australian: independent, resourceful, loyal to mates, but contemptuous of institutional authority, including religion. But the Anzacs in fact proved to be more susceptible to religion than is popularly thought, and the army chaplains who served them often expressed admiration for their Christ-like virtues, despite their disdain for religious forms. Chaplain Albert Bladen wrote:

As I lived with [the soldiers], and watched them from day to day, I often prayed that I might be found worthy to stand beside them at the great Assize, when He Who gave Himself for the life of the world, will cast up the final account.⁴

Gammage openly disclaims any Anzac uniqueness on the matter of religious indifference, suggesting that the same may be true of the soldiers of most nationalities. And indeed, a study of British and American Great War soldiers reveals that, like the Australians, religion rarely cropped up in their diaries or letters, and that, as Gammage suspected, they also were unlikely to be

³ Graham Seal, 'ANZAC: the sacred in the secular,' in Dawn Bennett (ed.), *Open to Interpretation* (Perth: Network Books, 2007), 135-144; see also K. S. Inglis, *Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape* (3rd revised ed.; Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2008).

⁴ Albert Bladen, 'An Anzac's tracks', M/S, PR01752, Australian War Memorial (hereafter AWM), Canberra, 77.

involved in organised religion.⁵ So perhaps the Australian soldier is less unique in this aspect than popularly believed. But the absence of religious references in diaries and letters is not in itself a safe indicator of the Anzacs' indifference to spiritual things. If religion and chaplains rarely make it into war diaries and histories, neither necessarily do pivotal figures such as battalion commanders.⁶

Problematically, some of the chaplains at Gallipoli wrote diaries or memoirs with few references to religion. Presbyterian chaplain E. N. Merrington, for example, wrote an unpublished encomium of his Gallipoli diaries which speaks of the 'spirit of Anzac' in quasi-religious and imperialistic language, but with startlingly few references to his spiritual duties.⁷ While characteristic of much of the jingoistic rhetoric of many Anglicans, Presbyterians and Methodists, it cannot simply be said that this was typical of those clergymen who owed a greater allegiance to mammon than to God. Andrew Gillison, a fellow Presbyterian chaplain, also left a Gallipoli diary almost devoid of religious references,⁸ yet no-one would accuse him of being a secular man. This saintly chaplain matched deep spirituality with charm, energy and fearlessness on the battlefield, and died on 22 August 1915 after attempting to rescue a wounded man in the open. Gillison was idolised not just by his battalion, but by the entire 4th Brigade, who kept his memory alive for months afterwards, despite the death of a mate being a commonplace on

⁵ Gammage, *The Broken Years*, xv-xvi; Richard Schweitzer, *The Cross and the Trenches: Religious Faith and Doubt Among British and American Great War Soldiers* (Westport CT & London: Praeger, 2003), 117.

⁶ Garth Pratten, *Australian Battalion Commanders in the Second World War* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 6-7.

⁷ Chaplain E. N. Merrington, Diary, File 3 DRL 3237, AWM, 382-394.

⁸ Chaplain Andrew Gillison, Diary PR86 028, AWM.

Gallipoli.⁹ Clearly the faith of a man was not necessarily easily identified by his own writings, nor did it necessarily make him as unpopular as widely believed.

In fact, a number of the best-loved Anzacs were chaplains, though Gammage insists that most Australian soldiers 'distrusted chaplains, and sometimes detested them', on the grounds that as Australian soldiers they naturally disliked organised religion, and that chaplains were officers (again, according to the Anzac legend, this entitled them to automatic distrust) with the privileges of rank but without the risk of battle. He notes that there were 'exceptional padres, men who ignored minor blasphemies to confront major evils, who showed themselves brave under fire, and who ranked the needs and welfare of soldiers above the patriot religion of the wartime pulpit', but he argues that their popularity was personal and 'probably they advanced the piety of their flock only incidentally'.¹⁰ Without making the reckless claims of evangelist Col Stringer, who hyperbolises the Anzacs' commitment to Christianity through two dreadful self-published books,¹¹ there is evidence which suggests that spiritual issues were of importance to many men and that chaplains could have quite an impact on the piety of many soldiers.

Ironically, the evidence begins with Gammage. As Robert D. Linder observes: 'Gammage's assessment of the place of

⁹ Merrington, 69, 95, 97, 306-307; Chaplain John Cope, letter to wife, 6 December 1915, PR 00490, AWM; Chaplain-General J. Lawrence Rentoul, 'Report of the Chaplaincy Service, A.I.F. (Presbyterian) during the war, 1914-1919,' 1 DRL 644, AWM, 5.

¹⁰ Gammage, *The Broken Years*, xiv-xv.

¹¹ *800 Horsemen* (Robina Qld: Col Stringer Ministries, 1999) and *Fighting Mac: Anzac Chaplain* (Robina Qld: Col Stringer Ministries, 2003).

religion is not consistent with the evidence presented in his own book. It is replete with religious imagery and references to Christianity, and brimming with morality and moral judgements.'¹² In a section dealing with fatalism among the soldiers, Gammage notes that 'many who among the habits of peace had served their Maker now took strength from His comfort'. He then quotes a letter from a 2 Battalion officer and former solicitor from Forbes:

What is it to me if I am killed? I am not left to worry over it... I think war is sent with a purpose by God, and I think it has its effect. Men are here who are immoral to a degree or were and after a time there is a change in them, one becomes more thoughtful for a time and ... [we] direct our thoughts to our homes and from there to God.... Men, who months ago would have been ashamed to have it known that they had a bible are seen reading it often in their posies... all [is] designed to draw men nearer to God.¹³

This is no pious chaplain reporting, needing to justify his work to his spiritual superiors, but rather the observations of a platoon commander who later died in action. Gammage adds a quote from the non-religious Lance Corporal Mitchell:

Taken all round the moral tone of our men has improved wonderfully with the advent of action. Swearing has diminished (except when close to the

¹² Robert D. Linder, *The Long Tragedy: Australian Evangelical Christians and the Great War, 1914-1918* (Adelaide: Open Book, 2000), 14. See especially note 15, page 17, where Linder exposes some of the hidden religious references in Gammage.

¹³ Gammage, *The Broken Years*, 108. The letter is from Lt C. H. Hunter, 15 October 1915.

enemy) and the most hardened turn their minds to divine things. As one man put it, 'when you are talking to your pal, look away, and when you look back see him in a heap with a bullet through his brain, it makes you think'.¹⁴

While Gammage tries to undermine these statements by adding 'most Australians found their surroundings too horrible to see the workings of divinity in them', he ironically reverses it again by quoting Lt Coe, 'And if my time is not up for years yet, well, I shall get back all right, and thank God for my narrow escapes'.¹⁵ Gammage seems bound to defend the thesis of Anzac religious indifference, despite the evidence under his nose.

Since then, a little has been done to better understand the religious attitudes of the Anzac soldiers, though much more remains unexplored. Michael McKernan published two fine studies on Australian religion and the Great War: *Australian Churches at War*, which devoted one chapter to the religious attitudes and experiences of soldiers; and *Padre*, on the work of Great War chaplains, which also contains many incidental observations about soldiers. Next came Robert D. Linder's *The Long Tragedy*, which explored the experiences of Evangelical Anzacs. Most recently, Michael Gladwin's excellent *Captains of the Soul* offers the first study of the Australian Army's chaplaincy Corps. It was commissioned as part of the official Army history series, demonstrating a belated but encouraging recognition of the part that official religion played in Australia's military history.¹⁶ Each of these books has built a case

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ McKernan, *Australian Churches at War*; Michael McKernan, *Padre: Australian Chaplains in Gallipoli and France* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin,

demonstrating that religious feeling and expression was present and visible in the A.I.F.

Other sources confirm that attitudes of thoughtful reflection on spiritual themes by many soldiers was not isolated. One man echoed Mitchell, noting that:

When a person can hear about a dozen of the big shells turning down in their flight through the air, believe me one learns to pray, and does it quick; and all of us, no matter how much we may have strayed, can't help but remember those early prayers we learned at our mother's knee (grandmother's in my case), and those early teachings of Christ and His love for us; His strayed and lost sheep.¹⁷

Chaplain T. P. Bennett noted in his diary late in the Gallipoli campaign:

The truth of the matter is that the realities of war have melted away the surface shyness of men about religion — they feel they are up against questions of life and death — As a censor I can testify to the real part religion bears in a soldier's life — it was shown in the innumerable letters home I have read in which the writers ask for the prayers of their relatives or express their trust in God.¹⁸

Another chaplain, Sidney Beveridge, wrote a treatise on the topic of Anzac spirituality, beginning: 'Unkind criticism has

1986); Linder, *The Long Tragedy*; Michael Gladwin, *Captains of the Soul: A History of Australian Army Chaplains* (Newport NSW: Big Sky, 2013).

¹⁷ *Australasian Record*, Vol 21, No 39, 17 December 1917, 4-5.

¹⁸ Chaplain T. P. Bennett, Diary, 12 November 1915, PRMF 0015, AWM.

often been expressed implying that there was very little real religious sentiment in the digger; that the experiences of the war had had the effect of estranging him from the church.' He concluded:

This one chaplain, at least, in spite of all that may be said to the contrary, and in spite of outward appearance of carelessness and indifference finished his service in the army with the firm conviction that beneath all the various and often grotesque disguises that the digger delighted to adopt, there was that fine religious sense and faith in the Divine Power about him, which was the secret of his wonderful success as a soldier and his loveliness as a man.

In the course of his argument Beveridge observed: 'the fact that in camp and on troopships there was no lack of attendance at the voluntary services so often held, while every excuse imaginable was offered as a reason for not attending compulsory parades.' He also recorded the impromptu service he held in a Field Hospital on Armistice Day 1918. Despite advanced notice of just ten minutes, the worship hall

was packed with men, [with] some of the most solemn acts of worship that chaplain [ie, Beveridge] ever experienced took place. A service held at the express wish of the men themselves, who felt the immediate desire to give thanks for a blessing, the value of which they of all people in the world were the best able to gauge.¹⁹

¹⁹ Chaplain Sidney A. Beveridge, Papers, 1DRL 0618, AWM.

Chaplain W. E. Dexter wrote in his Gallipoli diary of his Sunday services on 30 May 1915:

A grand service. Men from all four battalions and 4th Light Horse came although volunteers. The men are deeply religious now after their experiences and there is one dugout by the road where they always sing hymns at night and it sounds lovely in the quiet of the night'.

The next week he wrote, '10 am Church Parade (voluntary) more men coming every time.'²⁰

Chaplain Donald Blackwood recorded his initial contact with Australian soldiers, soon after boarding his troopship:

My first feelings were that I would shut myself up in my cabin. Even there I would not find any refuge. From outside my cabin floated the most fearful language I had ever heard. I think some of them must have been trying to 'shock' the 'Padre'. This was my first close contact with the 'digger' of later days. I was tempted, for a moment, to take him at his 'mouth' value. But I have learned long since that the Australian soldier is a 'hypocrite' or perhaps to put it more mildly, a 'camouflage artist'. To one who had not the sympathy to look beneath the surface he seemed rather a hopeless proposition from the point of view of religion. The 'Aussie' loved to pretend he had no religion, when all the time, deep beneath the

²⁰ Chaplain W. E. Dexter DSO, MC, Papers, PR 00248, AWM.

surface in most cases, he had a real sense of God and of His moral Law.²¹

Beveridge and Blackwood's comments reveal how easy it is to misread the evidence of Anzac spirituality. Roman Catholic Chaplain P. Lynch remembered with humour the various denominational nick-names: Civil Engineers (C of E), Scotchbyterians, Fancy Religions, Wowsers, and Otherwise, defined by Lynch as 'Calathumpians, Bluedomers, and Domain dossers, fair samples of Australian religious and non-religious persuasions'. One soldier addressed him as 'The Mick,' and added:

but I'm a b---- Protestant. Anyhow, you're a ----- good 'un'. Lynch prayed with him, and the soldier continued, 'Yes Padre, I used to smile at those things before, but now I understand.' And how sweetly and sincerely he said after me, 'My God, I believe in Thee, in Thee I put all my trust; I love Thee, for Jesus' sake forgive me'.²²

Chaplain James Gault, although only serving in safe base camps and hospitals, still noted that religion was taken seriously, voluntary worship services were attended by up to 50 per cent of the men, New Testaments were in demand, and bad language was almost entirely absent.

Communion services are not rushed [i.e. not well attended]. It doesn't express itself that way; but there is a subtle change of atmosphere in which one can

²¹ Chaplain Donald B. Blackwood, 'Experiences of Revd Donald B. Blackwood, M.C., M.A. Th Schol. as a chaplain with the A.I.F., October 1915 to February 1919, and impressions gained as a chaplain.' 1 DRL 619, AWM.

²² Chaplain P. Lynch, article, *Western Star*, 22 April 1922.

• speak almost to anybody about his soul without any fear of giving offence, and oh, the joy of seeing old-fashioned conversions.²³

He then listed a number of conversions that he witnessed. A. H. Tolhurst attracted 700 men to his voluntary morning services on board the troopship *Themistocles*, impressing an initially sceptical commanding officer.²⁴ Good attendances at voluntary services were not unusual on troopships, although it could be argued that attendance was boosted because little other entertainment or distraction was on offer.

Voluntary services were marked by the enthusiastic and often skilful singing of hymns. Such services could continue over several hours, as soldiers requested more favourites, and occasionally, another sermon.²⁵ Again, the singing of a hymn does not make a man religious, for even an actively anti-religious man could join in for the fellowship, musical pleasure and the nostalgia of home, and the Anzacs were noted singers in any case—of patriotic and popular songs, of humorous and often vulgar parodies of secular and sacred favourites, and of their own topical compositions.²⁶ Nevertheless, the popularity of hymn-singing should not be overlooked in any discussion of the Anzacs and religion, forming for many a meaningful expression of spiritual sentiment. Not only did it characterise ship-board life, but it was common at services and concerts behind the lines, while the singing on Gallipoli could have a mystical quality in

²³ Chaplain James Gault, letter, 20 October 1915, published in *Methodist*, 4 December 1915, 11.

²⁴ Chaplain A. H. Tolhurst, 'War reminiscences of an Australian padre,' MSS 1342, AWM, 20.

²⁵ Bennett, letter to wife, 17 May 1915 (n. 18 above).

²⁶ Graham Seal, *Inventing Anzac: The Digger and National Mythology* (St Lucia Qld: University of Queensland Press, 2004), 47-62.

the trenches, being taken up by all and sundry within earshot around the hills, or during a moving sunset-lit Communion service.²⁷

One of the other concerns of chaplains was the language of the Anzacs, and a number of chaplains took sermons on the subject, sometimes surprising their audience with their frankness. While some chaplains failed to impress,²⁸ perhaps even reinforcing the swearing as a matter of principle, others felt that their sermons made a difference. Rev. T. P. Bennett noted in his diary a packed service in the YMCA:

the singing, Lesson & sermon all got into a grand swing — the men all talked about it afterwards. I hit hard about careless language and quoted examples of the same which I heard during last week in our front lines to the astonishment of many on Parade.²⁹

Salvation Army Chaplain McKenzie felt that his direct sermons on the subject also made a difference, but his keen sense of humour could appreciate jokes made about his attitude to language.³⁰ As we have seen, Blackwood perceptively saw that much of the swearing was an attempt to impress, and Beveridge noted the 'grotesque disguises that the digger delighted to

²⁷ Chaplain A. C. Plane, letter published in *Spectator* 16 April 1915, 560; Chaplain William McKenzie, letter to wife, 21 April 1915, PR 84 150, AWM, Letter to Hay, 2 August 1915, PR 85/815, AWM; Chaplain J. Green, letter in *Methodist*, 14 August 1915, 2; Chaplain R. T. Pearce, letter in *Methodist*, 11 September 1915, 10; Chaplain W. E. Dexter, Diary, 1 August 1915, PR 00248, AWM.

²⁸ Herbert G. Carter, Diary, 3 January 1915, 3DRL 6418, AWM.

²⁹ Bennett, letter, 25 July 1915 (n. 18 above).

³⁰ McKenzie, letter to Hay, 10 February 1915; *Daily Mirror*, 25 April 1959, 5.

adopt'.³¹ Some scholars have observed the close connection between specifically Anzac language, including swearing, and the distinctive Australian identity.³² Swearing was one way to mark out their Australianness, and many took pride in outdoing the British at it. Yet, as quoted above from Lance Corporal Mitchell, swearing often diminished when there was no need to impress. Chaplain Dexter recorded that prolific swearing on Gallipoli was characteristic of the reinforcements, not the old hands, and that experienced officers would simply tell the new soldiers that such language was not on, to great effect.³³ As with other superficially undesirable qualities, bad language was part of the 'camouflage' that chaplains had to penetrate to see the real man underneath.

As already mentioned, a number of chaplains earned the respect, admiration and devotion of their flock. Gillison's memory endured long after his death, while Gault, Blackwood, Lynch and Tolhurst among others clearly enjoyed the confidence and respect of their men. Merrington, newly arrived on Gallipoli and without any marks to distinguish his clerical office, noted Chaplain Wray working in open sight of the Turks:

Some men were waiting under this traverse, and I heard one say to another, as they looked back at the padre busy with his care for the wounded and the dead. 'I'll tell you who've done _____ good work here, these _____ parsons!'³⁴

A handful of chaplains stand out from even these. One extraordinary Anzac chaplain was the Irish Jesuit, Michael

³¹ Beveridge (n. 19 above).

³² Seal, *Inventing ANZAC*, 24-27.

³³ Dexter, diary, 13 September 1915 (n. 20 above).

³⁴ Merrington diary, 69 (n. 7 above).

Bergin, who as a missionary to the Middle East before the war was interned by the Turks as a spy before eventually being deported to Egypt, which incidentally was the closest he ever came to Australia. There, he attached himself to the Australian Light Horse, as they were desperately short of Catholic chaplains. As the bureaucracy was slow in having him officially appointed chaplain, he enlisted in the Light Horse as a trooper in order to accompany the men to Gallipoli, eventually being attested Chaplain on the peninsula. In 1916, he went to France with the 13th Brigade, where he marked himself out again by his zeal, courage and cheerfulness. On 11 October 1917, he was severely wounded by shellfire, and died the next day, winning a posthumous Military Cross for his bravery. This devout priest was sincerely mourned by hundreds, and after the war, two of his close friends, Major General Legge and Captain Auld, became active Roman Catholics because of his influence.³⁵ Another outstanding chaplain was T. P. Bennett, in whose honour his commanding officer, Colonel Crouch, wrote an affectionate poem dedicated to T. P.—The Padre! Another of Crouch's poems movingly describes a communion service held in a dugout under fire.³⁶ Walter Dexter was the only front-line chaplain to serve for the entire war, an astonishing feat of human endurance, given the additional emotional and physical strains under which chaplains worked, dealing with the aftermath of death and wounds more consistently than most combatant soldiers, and frequently being required to walk long distances over difficult terrain to fulfil their duties to far-flung units. He was the most decorated of the Australian chaplains, with the

³⁵ Graham Wilson and Joe Crumlin, 'Trooper Bergin,' *Sabretache*, Vol XXXVIII, No 4, October-December 1997, 3-16.

³⁶ Bennett diary, 22 May 1915, 20 May 1915 (n. 18 above).

DSO and MC, and proved to be as popular as he was brave.³⁷ Scottish preacher Oswald Chambers, based at the YMCA at Zeitoun near Cairo and whose posthumous books are still influential in Christian circles, was also an exceptionally popular speaker to packed halls, among them hundreds of Australians, on topics such as 'What is the Good of Prayer?' and 'Religious Problems Raised by the War'. Displaying a shrewd sense of the psychology of soldiers, Chambers posted a huge sign in front of the tent saying, 'Beware! There is a religious talk here each evening'. Yet it was often better patronised than the letter-writing tent. One convalescent Australian soldier said to Chambers: 'It has been worthwhile enlisting [in the A.I.F.] to come to these classes.'³⁸

But perhaps the most legendary of all the chaplains was the Salvation Army's William McKenzie. He was a huge man in every facet, of robust constitution and apparently inexhaustible vitality and cheerfulness under the direst circumstances, and a charismatic gift for connecting with men of any rank or society. His popularity, founded on his work for the men in Egypt and Gallipoli and his extraordinarily successful campaign to have Australians write to anonymous lonely soldiers, grew to such proportions that he was given an official farewell parade from his battalion when he left France in late 1917, an honour usually reserved only for senior officers, not mere Chaplain Majors. He conducted a triumphal tour of Australia on his return, speaking to overflowing audiences of returned servicemen and their families everywhere he went,³⁹ which further enhanced his

³⁷ McKernan, *Padre*, 11-13, 125-127.

³⁸ David McCasland, *Oswald Chambers: Abandoned to God* (Grand Rapids MI: Discovery House, 1993), 216, 234, 236, 243.

³⁹ Adelaide Ah Kow, *William McKenzie, M.C., O.B.E., O.F. Anzac Padre* (London: Salvationist Publishing, 1949), 53-54.

reputation, and he was considered by some to be the most famous Anzac of them all, with the possible exceptions of Prime Minister Hughes and General Birdwood.⁴⁰ In the early 1920s, a visiting Salvation Army dignitary decided to test the truth of his reputation as a celebrity by asking McKenzie to accompany him to the Sydney Town Hall, just three blocks from the Army's Headquarters in Goulburn St. An hour later, they were still stuck in Goulburn St, surrounded by eager former soldiers.⁴¹ Even by 1933, his lustre had not diminished, the *Sydney Morning Herald* noting the rapturous reception given him by old Diggers at a Town Hall reception, and the Returned Soldiers journal *Reveille* lauding the man with superlatives.⁴² Yet McKenzie's popularity was not based solely on his extraordinary gift for organising brilliant concerts, or his hard work in supplying the troops with letter writing materials, hot drinks when coming out of the line, or other practical helps. He was also the most aggressively evangelistic of all the chaplains, and spared no effort in combating the evils of alcohol, swearing and brotheldom. Despite the handicap of such wowsers attitudes, he was almost universally adored. Lt-Col Le Maistre of 5th Battalion recalled on Gallipoli:

On Sunday afternoons, a little after four, you would see the Padre [McKenzie] coming down Shrapnel

⁴⁰ *Melbourne Herald*, quoted in *War Cry*, 16 February 1918, 5; Norman Campbell, 'Fighting Mac,' undated news clipping circa 1926, McKenzie File, Salvation Army Heritage Room, Bexley North, Sydney; C. E. W. Bean, radio broadcast, *News Digest*, 26 July 1947, transcript in PR 84 150, AWM; McKernan, *Padre*, 3.

⁴¹ Ah Kow, *William McKenzie*, 57.

⁴² 'A soldiers' hero: ovation for "Fighting Mac," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 April 1933; G. J. Donnellan, "'Fighting Mac,' celebrities of the A.I.F. (31), *Reveille*, 1 March 1933, 8-9.

Valley, singing "Jesus, Lover of My Soul" and the lads coming out of the dug-outs like rabbits out of burrows and following him. When he got them into a comparatively sheltered corner he proceeded to lead them in a short Sunday afternoon service.⁴³

As to the impact of chaplains on soldiers, McKenzie testified that during the war he had witnessed an estimated 2,000-3,000 conversions.⁴⁴ His diary and letters are studded with references to the numbers of men who responded to appeals at various meetings that he ran. Whether these spiritual commitments lasted is a moot point, but at the very least for a short time these men were influenced by Christianity to the point of publicly embracing it in the face of their largely secular mates. His CO, Col Macnaughten, was so impressed with McKenzie that he changed his will to leave his money to the Salvation Army, and Macnaughten's father, Sir Melville, also left a legacy to the Salvation Army in his will.⁴⁵ There are testimonies from secular-minded soldiers of the real regard they had for McKenzie's religion, one soldier saying to him, 'I'm not a religious man, but your damned religion'll do me every damned time!'⁴⁶

Naturally, men like McKenzie, Chambers and Bergin were exceptional, and many padres were far from that. Few had experience of 'the man on the street', coming from church enclaves which had lost touch with the working class, and where

⁴³ Ronald J. Austin, *The Fighting Fourth: A History of Sydney's 4th Battalion 1914-19* (McRae, Vic: Slouch Hat, 2007), 90.

⁴⁴ 'Chaplain "Mac," M.C. Conclusion of his speech at the welcome home in the Exhibition Building,' *War Cry*, 30 March 1918, 2.

⁴⁵ McKenzie, letter to wife, 31 January 1916, PR 84 150, AWM.

⁴⁶ Campbell, 'Fighting Mac' (n. 40 above). On McKenzie, see now Daniel Reynaud, *The Man the Anzacs Revered: William 'Fighting Mac' McKenzie Anzac Chaplain* (Warburton: Signs Publishing, 2015) [ed.].

women already predominated.⁴⁷ Chaplains were contemptuously dubbed 'Cook's tourists', because of the numerous short-term, comfort-loving padres who made little effort to connect with their men.⁴⁸ Padres were also associated with the compulsory Church Parade each Sunday, which were widely loathed, even by some chaplains.⁴⁹ While plain, direct and honest preaching could move men, eliciting on one occasion the response from one soldier to another, 'Stung somewhat, didn't it?', poor quality preaching left men standing for an hour in all weathers, some surreptitiously reading the paper, playing noughts and crosses or even gambling.⁵⁰ One lieutenant about to embark for Gallipoli from Cairo noted the sermon title of a chaplain who had 'the audacity to preach Fatalism & Predestination'. A private wrote home:

The parsons over here are very colourless specimens... One poor fellow told us last Sunday that it was not so very dangerous fighting. That there were almost as many dangers in times of peace with trains, cars and orange peels of all things.⁵¹

Some padres learned from experience. An officer wrote to his father from the Mena Camp in Egypt:

⁴⁷ Hilary M. Carey, *Believing in Australia: a Cultural History of Religions* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1996), 113-117; McKernan, *Australian Churches at War*, 128.

⁴⁸ McKernan, *Australian Churches at War*, 135-136.

⁴⁹ Chaplain F. W. Rolland, 1 DRL 0646, AWM; Blackwood; Dexter, 25 October 1914, 17 January 1915.

⁵⁰ Austin Laughlin, 'Our soldiers in Egypt,' *Spectator*, 7 May 1915.

⁵¹ Greg Kerr, *Private Wars: Personal Records of the Anzacs in the Great War* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2000), 147.

I attended divine service this morning – the Dean [Talbot, the Anglican Dean of Sydney] officiated. The parsons complain of not being able to get hold of the men and when they get a chance as today with about 2500 or 3000 men they seem to do their best to make as dull a show as possible. The men can barely hear, others have to stand the whole time in the blazing sun.

Soon after, he wrote:

Church Parade today – the Dean was much better; he is barracked with the 3rd Battalion and they are bringing him up the way he should go. If he makes any slip or preaches for 1 second over 10 minutes he has to stand drinks for the mess.⁵²

The well-intentioned and scholarly Talbot, though probably unsuited to his role, managed to make the best of it, though he was always detested by at least one battalion commander.⁵³ Another who learnt on the job was James Green. Occasionally an irritant to his fellow padres and to the men because of his pompous ways, he developed into a sympathetic and loved chaplain.⁵⁴ Others were less successful, being characterised by their fellow chaplain Dexter as being too old, unfit, or too wowserish. Chaplains who refused to mix with the men, or share their hardships, quickly lost any hope of influencing the majority.⁵⁵ Effective chaplains dug trenches with the men, lived

⁵² Herbert G. Carter, letters, 1 DRL 0192, AWM, 25 December 1914, 3 January 1915.

⁵³ McKenzie, letter to wife, 31 January 1916, PR 84 150, AWM.

⁵⁴ Dexter, 25 October 1914; *Standard*, 15 December 1948; McKernan, *Padre*, 42-43.

⁵⁵ Dexter, 14 September 1915, 16 September 1915, 9 October 1915; McKenzie, letter to wife, 18 February 1916, PR 84 150, AWM.

as close as possible to the front line, and occasionally shared with them a surreptitious beer or hand of poker, or a joke with a man with a bullet wound through both cheeks of his bottom about showing off war scars to the ladies.⁵⁶ They found that by developing friendships with the men they were able to hold spiritual conversations, often initiated by the men themselves.⁵⁷

The other great sin of chaplains in the eyes of the Anzacs was sectarianism and religious exclusivity, what one soldier termed 'the fragile superfluous barriers [of] denominationalism'.⁵⁸ Men respected chaplains such as the Anglican Talbot, the Methodists Plane, Bladen and Green, Presbyterians Gillison and Merrington, Catholics Power, Murphy and Goidanich, and Salvation Army McKenzie, who worked across denominational boundaries,⁵⁹ but had contempt for the smaller-minded. One Presbyterian officer, who played the piano for Church parades each week

asked the chaplain, a C of E man, if I could go to sacrament. He said "no" as I wasn't confirmed. I said, —well never mind what I said, but I gave him my candid opinion of a parson who couldn't infringe

⁵⁶ McKenzie, letter to Hay, 16 March 1915; Chaplain R. Hennessey, 'My experiences as a chaplain with the A.I.F.,' 1 DRL 0635, AWM; Dexter, 28 April 1915, 7 August 1915, 28 August 1915.

⁵⁷ McKenzie, letters to Hay, November 1914, 22 January 1915; Dexter, 29 December 1914; Tolhurst, 27; Hennessey, 'My experiences as a chaplain with the AIF' (n. 56 above).

⁵⁸ Leo T. Pearce, 'A religious service on the eve of battle,' *Spectator*, 25 June 1915, 918.

⁵⁹ Linder, *The Long Tragedy*, 127-128; Chaplain Andrew Gillison, Diary, PR 86 028, AWM, 65; McKernan, *Australian Churches at War*, 137.

rules for once in a country where there isn't a church in every street.⁶⁰

It was not just the chaplains who exercised a spiritual influence. Many men, both officers and enlisted, were active in their faith, winning respect for standing up for their beliefs. As noted, one of the great myths of the Anzacs is that the typical soldier was a 'rough, hard-bitten, cynical, worldly, irreligious, irrepressible, reckless, womanising, gambling, independent-minded hell-raiser'.⁶¹ While that stereotypical character can be found, the men came from a variety of backgrounds. One study concluded that the A.I.F. was made up of a roughly equal mix of wowsers and larrikins:

Many of those who rushed to join in the first hysteria had felt a deep moral compulsion and the proportion of such men increased as the war went on.... They had the same high calling as had Sir Galahad, and like him, were 'pure'. They had never known the love of a woman and many never would; they were puritanical in the best sense of the word. They did not drink and most did not smoke; they were at one extreme. At the other were those who went in because they were out of work and the pay was very good. A uniform would give them prestige and a lot of free beer. Their morals were non-existent.⁶²

One man recalled how the lax moral standards of Australian civilian life shook many returning soldiers at the end of the war:

⁶⁰ Lt William Blaskett, letters to parents, 1 DRL 0130, AWM.

⁶¹ Linder, *The Long Tragedy*, 44.

⁶² Brian Lewis, *Our War: Australia During World War I* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1980), 134.

We wanted to be civilians but found it wasn't so easy [being pressured to smoke and drink].... I thought of the boys, some of the fine, clean-living boys you could meet anywhere. There were no canteens in the 1st AIF and about half our unit neither smoked nor drank. The standards of behaviour and honesty were very high.⁶³

The sheer number of active Christians can be guessed at by looking at the honour boards of those who enlisted or gave their lives, which still adorn the walls of many older church buildings, although admittedly some names may have been the non-attending menfolk of women parishioners. Some quick statistics: by February 1916, 110 men had enlisted from St. Michael's Parish, Wollongong, of which 55 were killed; Ashfield Presbyterian church contributed 106 men out of a congregation of 500; Malvern Methodist church contributed 165 men, of whom 32 were killed.⁶⁴ These laymen often supported the chaplains in their work, and even organised their own ministry through prayer and Bible study groups. A letter from a soldier records a Bible study group organised in Egypt, made up of men from Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Brethren, Seventh-day Adventist and Salvationist churches.⁶⁵ A number of clergymen enlisted in the ranks, sometimes serving as stretcher-bearers like Robert Pittendrigh, who died alongside Gillison while rescuing the wounded on Gallipoli. Pittendrigh was effective both as a soldier and as a Christian witness, winning over men despite their initial suspicion of a Wesleyan minister. Two other Methodists, one a clergyman and another the son of

⁶³ Sapper Henry William Dadswell, M.M., quoted in Patsy Adam-Smith, *The Anzacs* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1991), 461.

⁶⁴ Linder, *The Long Tragedy*, 145-152.

⁶⁵ Laughlin, 'Our Soldiers in Egypt' (n. 50 above).

a clergyman, also proved themselves as soldiers before gaining the respect of their comrades as Christians.⁶⁶ There were other 'Fighting Padres' such as the theologian Everard Digges la Touche who died at Lone Pine leading his platoon, but perhaps the best-known was Captain Frank Bethune MC, an Anglican curate who enlisted as a private, was commissioned and achieved fame not only for his 18-day stand with just seven men of his machine gun section cut off from his own lines in March 1918, but also for his inspiring preaching.⁶⁷

The war, however, could have both positive and negative effects on men's spirituality. It turned many men to God and to religion. One soldier recorded having rediscovered his abandoned Adventist religion hiding in a shell hole sheltering from a ferocious bombardment, while carrying a message to battalion headquarters. Such was his assurance of divine presence that he walked unscathed the last part of the way, to the astonishment of the colonel who witnessed it. From then on he used prayer rather than 'booze' to manage his depression and homesickness.⁶⁸ Another Christian soldier made considerable effort to obtain literature from another denomination, asking his mother in Australia to chase it up and send it to him.⁶⁹ The war also turned many away, even of the faithful. Of eighty Methodist ministers who enlisted during the war, twenty-two quit the ministry after the war, while a further fifteen trainee ministers did not pursue their studies. Some had become physically or emotionally incapable of resuming their duties, others had lost

⁶⁶ *Methodist*, 25 September 1915.

⁶⁷ G. P. R. Chapman, 'Bethune, John Walter (1882-1960),' *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol 7 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1979), 281-282.

⁶⁸ *Australasian Record*, Vol 21, No 39, 17 December 1917, 4-5.

⁶⁹ *Australasian Record*, Vol 20, No 8, 28 February 1916, 8.

their assurance of their calling or their beliefs. Devout Methodist layman Bert Bishop retained his faith and morals during the war, but after demobilisation ceased to attend church, as his faith in all institutional leadership was lost.⁷⁰ A Baptist clergyman serving in the ranks noted that 'it is surprising how quickly men who, under different circumstances, would be passably religious, etc., lose all thought of it and utterly abandon themselves'.⁷¹ Another young soldier described how he lost his Methodist aversion to the mortal sins of swearing, drinking, gambling and prostitution as he grew to admire the many men of the A.I.F. who practised such vices yet embodied the very essence of Christianity—love for their fellow (Australian) men to the point of laying down their lives.⁷² Perhaps the more strict the religion, the stronger the reaction of the individual soldier, either in clinging to his beliefs or rejecting them. In any case, reading through church journals of the period reveals many Christian men whose faith shone brightly during their military service, as well as heart-breaking lists of casualties from the various faiths.

What does become clear from what we have seen is that the average Australian soldier was not necessarily indifferent to appropriate spiritual influence, and that spiritually-minded men could have a profound impact on secular Anzacs. Christian ministry was not automatically effective, even from the best-loved and respected of chaplains such as McKenzie. Nor did all Christians come through the war with their faith unscathed. Yet perhaps the majority of soldiers became susceptible to spiritual influences at some point during their war service. How they

⁷⁰ Linder, *The Long Tragedy*, 161.

⁷¹ Dobbins, *Australian Baptist*, 30 March 1915.

⁷² McKernan, *Australian Churches at War*, 136-137.

responded to those influences depended on various factors: the availability and quality of the spiritual nurturers, the influence of their peers, their own predilections, choices and responses to their war experiences, and the influence of family back home.

As Michael McKernan has pointed out, one effect of the war on many chaplains was to challenge the basis of their beliefs that only Christian faith (and in many cases only their version of the Christian faith) could produce the Christian virtues. They almost universally shared an admiration for the cheerfulness, endurance and selflessness of the Anzac soldier, but:

this goodness, which conformed in so many ways with the Christian recipe for salvation, ... existed independently of formal religious belief. Chaplains discovered that a man, outwardly irreligious, wicked even, was capable of performing good and even heroically unselfish acts.

Such behaviour provoked contrasting responses in the chaplains. Some felt that the men were fundamentally religious, others pessimistically felt that these exhibitions of virtue would make little difference in the men's commitment to Christ and the church. However, the most perceptive of the chaplains learnt much about the Australian manifestation of faith, and 'many chaplains believed the A.I.F. could teach Australian churchmen a lesson'. McKernan notes that 'the successful chaplains adapted to the A.I.F. code and were, to some extent, converted by the men they had come to convert'. The first change was to abandon sectarianism and work in the maximum spirit of unity. Australians were not interested in denominational rivalries, and sought to promote the shared underlying core values. Secondly, churchmen needed to share the life experiences of those they wished to reach. The successful chaplains lived as much as

possible with the soldiers, sharing all their hardships, even thought their privileged position as officers and non-combatants gave them a more comfortable alternative. After establishing personal relationships with the men, chaplains found them to be receptive of spiritual interaction, both individually and corporately. They also recognised, much as Chaplain Blackwood had, that the Australian is a 'camouflage artist' on matters spiritual, giving the appearance of disinterest but, once genuinely befriended, proving to be open to conversations about faith. On returning to Australia, some chaplains were distressed by the political conservatism of the bulk of the Christian churches, which sided with government and big business and failed to serve the needs and interests of the majority of working Australians, among them tens of thousands of returned soldiers. Dean Talbot was so thoroughly transformed by his war experiences that he backed the workers in the general strike in New South Wales in 1917. His stand aroused the bitterest response in conservative circles, and was lambasted by both the Anglican and Presbyterian press as 'ludicrous,' 'stupid,' and 'feeble'. Finally, the wiser chaplains developed an 'indifference to conventionalities,'⁷³ seeing to the heart of matters rather than to their externals. As Blackwood put it, 'one learned that a "Padre" had to be deaf in one ear (so as not to hear the swears) and blind in one eye (so as not to see the gambling or boozed)'.⁷⁴ Faith without personal pretence or elaborate theological walls proved attractive to the Anzacs. Chaplain Kenneth Henderson returned from the war a changed man, and transferred his ministry from the pulpit to a life of broadcasting and publishing. 'Like others he found great difficulty in reconciling the

⁷³ McKernan, *Australian Churches at War*, 128-130, 140-143.

⁷⁴ Blackwood, 'Experiences of Revd Colonel Donald B. Blackwood (n. 21 above).

magnitudes of suffering with traditional theodicy and eschatology'.⁷⁵ Padre James Gault summarised what he had learnt about the Australian soldier and religion under six points: that the soldier believed in prayer; that he believed in life after death; that he saw sin differently from the church—but rather like Christ towards the Prodigal Son, not being concerned with drinking, gambling and swearing, but considering the absence of honesty, integrity and loyalty as true sin; that he admired above all things unselfishness, courage, and sacrifice, all of which are best expressed in the life of Christ; that he had an utter disregard for denominational distinctions; and that he had taught the padre to see the greatness of 'The Common Man'. Gault concluded: 'Digger! I salute you—No; I stand bareheaded as you pass.'⁷⁶ In effect, he noted the essential compatibility of the Anzacs' religion with that of Christ, but ironically not with that of many of the churches.

Oswald Chambers' talks on the Book of Job, delivered at the Zeitoun Camp, beautifully articulated an appreciation for the man who found that conventional religion had failed to touch him. He argued that those who had lost faith in their religious beliefs were now better placed to believe in God. His willingness to question dogmas, and his ability to speak of God outside of the boundaries of institutional religion gave his talks considerable appeal, striking many soldiers as cutting to the truth of issues. He understood that the anti-religious attitude of many soldiers came from a well-founded distrust of conventional religion, which all too easily could hide the presence of God rather than reveal it. 'If a soldier huffed, "I can't stand religious

⁷⁵ Ian Breward, *Australia: 'the most godless place under heaven'* (Melbourne: Beacon Hill, 1988), 50.

⁷⁶ James Gault, *Padre Gault's Stunt Book* (London: Epworth Press, circa 1920), 173-175.

people”, Oswald often said, “Neither can I”.⁷⁷ Chaplain Bennett anticipated Chambers’ distinction between religious labels and true spirituality when he recorded a ship-board conversation in 1914: ‘I had a little talk yesterday with Capt Abbott who describes himself as an atheist but who at heart is nothing of the kind—this kind of life does give one an insight into human nature!’⁷⁸

Many Christians, both clergy and lay, had hoped that the war would lead to a peacetime revival of religion. Their dreams were dashed, for the churches in Australia had become hopelessly divided over conscription, and had descended into attritional sectarian warfare and partisan support for conservative causes—except for the Catholics who won some respect by supporting the working class, many of whom were Irish Catholics. Amongst religious organisations perhaps only two emerged from the war with an enhanced reputation: the Salvation Army and the YMCA, earned through the practical, non-sectarian help given to soldiers. For many returned servicemen, clubs such as the RSSILA offered the emotional safety and fellowship that the churches might have provided had they been able to rise above the petty social and religious politics of the time.⁷⁹ Whatever goodwill that some of the chaplains had generated during the war was dissipated after it, and the Anzac myth developed as a secular narrative adapted to an increasingly secular society, until now it stands in the view of some commentators in the place of

⁷⁷ Oswald Chambers, *Baffled to Fight Better: Talks on the Book of Job* (London: Oswald Chambers Publications Association & Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1955). See for example 36, 39, 54, 64, 66, 73; McCasland, *Oswald Chambers*, 227.

⁷⁸ Bennett, letter to wife, 21 May 1915.

⁷⁹ Roger C. Thompson, *Religion in Australia: A History* (2nd ed.; Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2002), 57, 87, 98-90.

the various religious divides as Australia’s unifying secular religion,⁸⁰ complete with its own cult and worship practices, from which most Christian associations have been sloughed off and forgotten.

Yet it was not an inevitable progression. While Gammage’s general conclusion about the lack of impact of religion on the Anzacs is basically correct, it overlooks the fact that this stemmed perhaps more from the failures of the churches and the bulk of the chaplains than from an inherent disinterest on the part of the majority of the Anzacs themselves. While for some soldiers the war experiences destroyed their belief in a grand, God-directed purpose, for another significant minority, a religious perspective served as the governing narrative framework of the war. They saw in the war God’s purposes being worked out. The Anzacs in general were responsive to religion when it was presented in an authentic, open, unpretentious and inclusive manner, detached from dogma and denominationalism. Had the churches been able to supply sufficient chaplains of the calibre of Dexter, McKenzie, Bergin and Gillison, who embodied these values, and had they been able to offer a spiritual home for the returned soldiers regardless of creed, class or politics, Christianity might have had a wider impact on the Anzacs, and it may have become one of the threads in the Grand Anzac Narrative. Add to this the Anzacs’ habitual disguise on matters religious and it is not surprising that most have wrongly perceived the Anzacs as being indifferent to religion.

⁸⁰ Interviewee, ABC TV Sydney news broadcast, Anzac Day services, 25 April 2009, 7.00pm news; Manning Clark & Michael Cathcart, *Manning Clark’s History of Australia* (Sydney: Penguin, 1995), 520.