

**Faith and Nationalism:  
How Christianity Shaped England During World War I**

Taylor Kliss

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Until recently, religion was often overlooked as a factor in World War I. In England specifically, Christianity was not analyzed in the context of the war, as many scholars believed the religion had become somewhat obsolete in everyday life. As such, the existing scholarship focused solely on the fact that secularism was on the rise in the twentieth century. While this was true, England was still deeply religious and a great deal of religious rhetoric was used throughout the conflict. Moreover, through the analysis of religious rhetoric in wartime newspapers, it is clear that the religious dimensions of wartime propaganda were the result of many small changes in religious thought and behavior stretching back through the nineteenth and even the eighteenth centuries. These small changes created the opportunity for institutionalized religion and spirituality, allowing a unique blend of old traditions and new ideas to emerge. Religious life was constantly changing and not nearly as static as some scholarship has noted. On the one hand, many scholars and political figures condemned the Church of England and claimed themselves to be spiritual rather than religious in the Christian sense. Conversely, though, data showed an increase in clergymen in the Church of England in the decades leading into the outbreak of the war. By understanding differences and changes over time and by breaking down preconceived ideas about the state of religion in England, it is clear that wartime propaganda was a culmination of centuries of a constantly changing religious climate. And while many scholars have argued that Christianity was on the decline, the Church of England nonetheless played a large role in shaping the rhetoric behind the war effort.

In addition to the role of religious rhetoric in various types of propaganda used at the time, it is important to understand that religious thought went much further than rhetoric alone. A main factor that was often examined in the context of World War I was the rise of nationalism. The Church saw this rise in nationalism, and through their sermons and other forms of

propaganda, was able to create a unique Christian nationalism to call its citizens to arms. In the Church's eyes, it was up to England to restore Christian morals to those that had gone astray, and they needed the support of the entire nation to do so.

Whether or not England was still a religious nation in the years leading up to the war is a crucial question that lays the groundwork for the analysis. Much of this dispute comes down to varying definitions of religiosity. It is difficult to judge how religious a nation is based solely on participation levels in church, since that is only one factor that plays into the religiosity of a people. As noted by James Moffat in his analysis of the war's effect on religious life in England, church attendance remained largely static during the war years, but there was evidence of an increase in personal faith. Moffat claimed that the war deepened "three convictions... prayer, the atonement, and immortality."<sup>1</sup> So, while the war didn't cause a great increase or decrease in church attendance, it reinforced ideas that many people already held, using them to frame the war in a positive light. Religion was often overshadowed by other major changes happening during this time period, and because of this, many would argue that England and other nations like it became more secular during the war. These arguments are difficult to evaluate, as there has been some dispute over what exactly constitutes secularization and what parts of society that it actually changed.

More generally accepted causes of the war include new technology created by the rise of industrialization and nationalism as it related to secularism. The idea that secularism replaced religion as a unifying force does not take into account the idea that religion merely looked different than it had in decades past. The main difference was that Christianity no longer dominated individuals' time. During this period, people had more opportunities for occupations

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<sup>1</sup> James Moffat, "The Influence of the War upon the Religious Life and Thought of Great Britain," *The American Journal of Theology* 20, no. 4 (October 1916): 481-493, [www.jstor.org/stable/3155547](http://www.jstor.org/stable/3155547), 484.

than decades ago, when church jobs were some of the most sought-after positions. Similarly, people had more time for leisure activities and were not constantly engaged in religious activities and obligations. That being said, England was still a Christian nation with those beliefs just displaced to a separate plane from other secular activities. Further research on this topic reveals new opinions on secularization itself, with some scholars believing that the process didn't begin until the 1960s. The assumptions about religiosity at the turn of the century have slowly begun to fall apart, and recent studies have made it clear that there are many aspects to consider when examining what is traditionally deemed a very secular time period in England's history. In a 2015 analysis, for example, Jeremy Morris argued that secularization did not occur in the early 1900s when many scholars say it did, and that it "cannot be linked directly to industrialization, or urbanization, or the rise of class consciousness."<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that while earlier onset secularization had been the status quo up until recently within the scholarship, much of the analysis concerning the role of Christianity within the war has been brought into question. With this in mind, it seems possible that the church played a much larger role in society and thus in the war than is typically acknowledged, even at a time during which scholars claim secularism was rising.

When looking at religion at the outbreak of the war, it is important to outline several social changes that occurred in England during the nineteenth century, as the culmination of these small changes resulted in a unique religious climate in the country at the turn of the century. During the nineteenth century, Anglicanism was the religious norm; many other groups were persecuted or simply not allowed to practice. England was a Christian nation, and the Church's deep ties to the state were integral to the way life worked in the years leading up to

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<sup>2</sup>Jeremy Morris, "Secularization and Religious Experience: Arguments in the Historiography of Modern British Religion," *The Historical Journal* 55, no. 1 (2012): 195-219, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41349651>.

the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to the official English Heritage website, one of the main reasons that people assume traditional Anglican religiosity was on the decline is due to the expansion of other religious groups within society. In reality, these other groups experienced a growth in population, largely due to the arrival of new immigrants, and legislation was passed that allowed other denominations to practice. By the 1850s, different practices, such as spiritualism, had gained substantial traction, and there was also an uptick in social participation amongst other established groups - such as Jews fleeing persecution in other countries. Similarly, there had also been a rise in non-Anglican Christians, such as Baptists and Methodists, so while Christianity in its traditional English sense might have become less prominent, Christianity as a whole was growing in the years that led up to the war. Even the clergy of the Anglican Church grew by nearly ten thousand members from 1841-1875. So, while traditional English religion might have had to share more space with other denominations and secular ideas, society was far from irreligious at the turn of the century. The idea that England was not religious can be corrected by saying that the religious landscape had undergone numerous changes over the nineteenth century, including the fact that people had stopped conforming to traditional social norms such as strict attendance and clerical duties. Faith was still prominent; it just looked fairly different than it had in decades past.<sup>3</sup>

With that being said, though, it is unfair to say that Anglicanism and the Church of England had fallen out of favor as other groups grew. The following graph, produced from census data, shows a small uptick in Church of England membership between the years 1910-1915. The only other group rivaling this increase were Roman Catholics, but that increase

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<sup>3</sup> Victorians: Religion,” <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/story-of-england/victorian/religion/>; Michael F. Snape, "Reconsidering British Religion and the First World War." In *Life after Tragedy: Essays on Faith and the First World War Evoked by Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy*, ed. Brierley Michael W. and Byrne Georgina A., (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2017), 3-18, doi: 10.2307/j.ctvj4sw4c.8.

can be attributed to the influx of refugees that England received over the war period, as well as the loosened restrictions on practicing and opening churches.

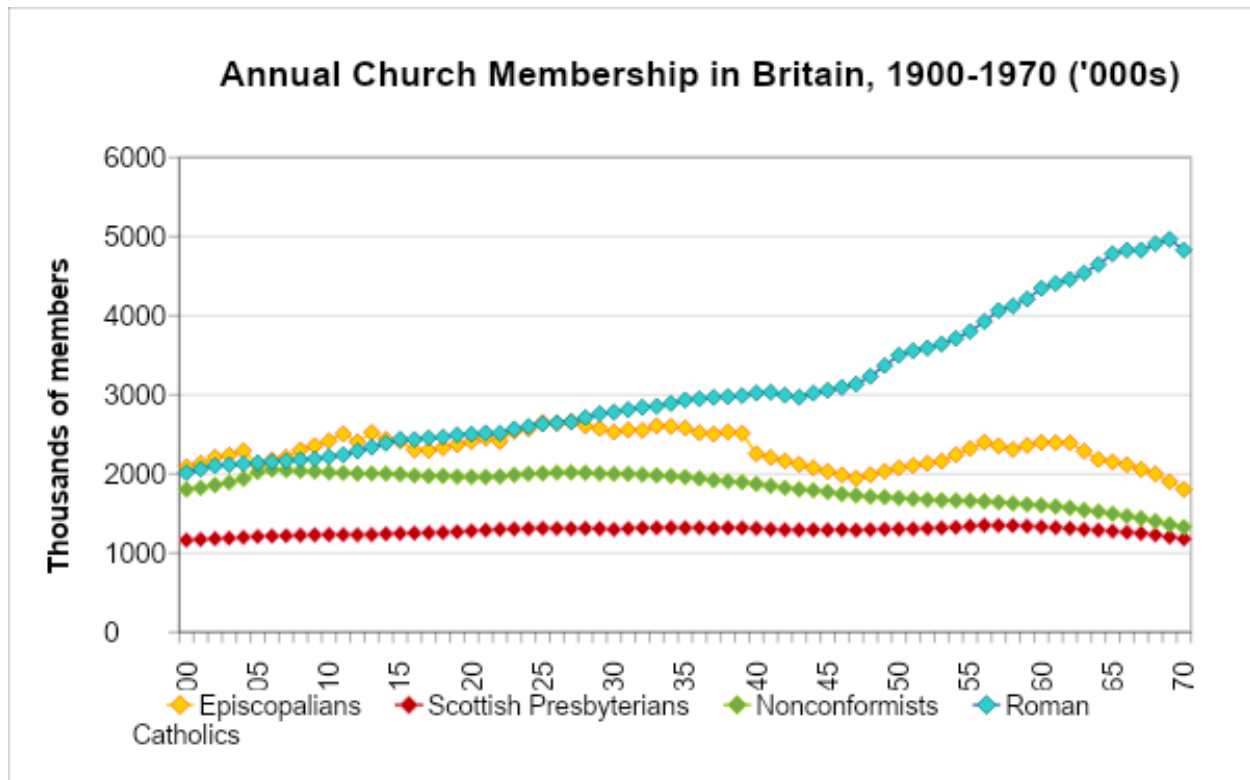


Figure : "Annual Church Membership in Britain, 1900-1970 ('000s)," (graph), [www.brin.ac.uk](http://www.brin.ac.uk)

Though Anglican membership did taper off during the years of the conflict, it rebounded in the few years immediately following peace agreements. The sudden decrease was most likely due to the loss of thousands of churchgoing men killed on the front lines, the decrease in birth rate during the war years, and the general social upheaval of the period. This data suggests that it is unfair to say that religion had tapered off to the point where its analysis in the context of the war is useless. Religion thrived in many ways and England was still a Christian nation, despite its new need to "compete" with numerous other groups and denominations.

With the religious context of late nineteenth and early twentieth century England established, other scholarship on the topic can be examined. One of the most prominent scholars in this field is Philip Jenkins, as his book, *The Great and Holy War: How World War I Became a Religious Crusade*, details many of the religious aspects of the war that previous scholarship tended to overlook. While Jenkins doesn't exclusively focus on England in his work and touches on many different countries and faiths, the points he makes about England, as well as some of the patterns that he uncovers, are crucial in exploring the relationship between English Christianity and the war. In the book, Jenkins details the differences between being a practicing Christian and a believer in Christ. While he notes that many believers in Christ, especially those in more urban and industrial areas, would not attend church and even resented the clergy in some cases. However, they "applied a Christian worldview" in almost everything that they did, which would imply their tendency to listen to and be influenced by religious propaganda.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, most of the scholarship that has been done on the religious makeup of England before and during the war dealt with the two extremes: extremely religious or extremely secular. One interpretation is saying that the general population was not religious, and the other is saying that they were extremely religious. However, by looking at the data from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it is clear that religiosity itself had been transformed, and while it might have been on the decline in its traditional sense, Christianity was thriving in new ways.

In his analysis, Jenkins also notes numerous examples of religious images derived directly from the battlefields, and puts the revival of religion in the years leading up to the war into perspective. In his analysis, he challenges the notion of secularism running rampant in Europe, instead postulating the presence of a religious revival of sorts. There were many

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<sup>4</sup> Philip Jenkins, *The Great and Holy War: How World War I Became a Religious Crusade* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015), 113.

influences on this phenomenon, such as that of American traditionalism, but many Christians - in Europe and across the globe - attempted to fight militarism and secularization by incorporating religion back into their daily lives. When the war eventually broke out in 1914, many soldiers turned to the rhetoric and the stories that were part of their lives before being sent to the trenches. Jenkins notes that at the beginning of the war, many soldiers referred to the conflict as Armageddon and Apocalypse, and believed that God was angry at England for its sins. Similarly, many soldiers recalled seeing angels on the battlefield shortly before death, truly believing the violence to be the will of God.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, many soldiers relied on the lessons that they learned from Christianity as a means to cope with immense losses suffered on the front lines. In his analysis of the lives of British soldiers, museum curator Matthew Shaw wrote that many turned to fatalism as a means to cope with the possibility that death lurked around every corner. They believed that if they were meant to die, it was God's will, and though it may sound morbid, beliefs such as this helped some soldiers cope with the fact that many of them would not make it out alive. In his analysis, Shaw also notes that fatalism, along with superstition, helped motivate both the troops and the others back home.<sup>6</sup> When loved ones and people who had not yet enlisted or been drafted heard these stories of bravery and heroism, it eased their worries, encouraged them to support the cause, or even prompted them to join and die a hero as well. As these stories eventually made their way into mainstream media, it became easy for people to buy into them, especially given that the use of religious rhetoric in church services and in the media was meant to pull at heartstrings and the Christian values that many still strongly believed in.

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<sup>5</sup> Jenkins, *The Great and Holy War*, 20; Jenkins, *The Great and Holy War*, 18-19.

<sup>6</sup>Matthew Shaw, "Faith, Belief and Superstition," The British Library, The British Library, January 20, 2014, <https://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/faith-belief-and-superstition>.



Religious rhetoric was one of the simplest ways in which the Church was able to connect on a human level with many of its citizens. The aforementioned accounts of soldiers seeing angels or even God on the battlefield only gave those in power more compelling imagery to help them garner more support for the war effort. An article from the *Globe* newspaper in 1916 used religious imagery to describe a battle: “you feel the beat of unseen wings—of those who will presently gather men into the Great Parade. In the moment of battle men are not cheap; they are often god-like, looking death calmly between the eyes—they move forward, the incarnation of Relentless Faith.”<sup>7</sup> Statements such as this were fashioned to have an emotional impact on readers. Even to individuals who were not devout Christians, the language often used in propaganda was meant to evoke a similarly somber tone. Ultimately, it was meant to make readers feel as if the conflict was much greater than themselves - something taking place on a transcendental plane. Passages such as this one also made martyrdom seem like a noble fate, encouraging men to leave their homes to go fight, because at the end of it all, they would be saved. No other justification was needed, as salvation was guaranteed at the end of it all.

These images were not just created through vivid language, though. Newspapers also used illustrations filled with religious imagery intended to resonate with the general public. The graphic “Church and War: Religion on the Western Front” by J. Simont, which was published in the *London Illustrated News*, showed two soldiers praying in the middle of the battlefield. Though the description published alongside it also used powerful imagery to drive home the ideas of faith, the art itself included various allusions to God. The background of the illustration is nearly indistinguishable due to the shadows and the dark shading, but in the foreground, Simont created a ring of light around the two soldiers, a technique indicative of holiness or the

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<sup>7</sup> “By One from the Front,” *Globe*, September 24, 1914, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0001652/19140924/013/0001>.

presence of God.<sup>8</sup> This was only one of many images that utilized similar techniques to help bring Christian imagery into the hands of everyday people. Even though the art *was* indicative of some of the experiences that English soldiers had on the battlefield, it was still a form of propaganda that used religious pathos as a means to encourage a positive outlook on the war.

One of the most direct ways Christianity was used as a tool to aid in the war effort was through unique sermons made by prominent Christian teachers through the duration of the war. These were different from other sermons, as they directly addressed the challenges the war brought to religious individuals and helped make the violence of war less horrific for the general population. Around a dozen of the most notable sermons were compiled by Randall Thomas Davidson, and though they originated in different regions and years throughout the war, many of the topics and themes they encompass are the same. Some of these religious themes include loss, the afterlife, and peace. Perhaps most notably, the sermons tackled a complex topic Christians in England struggled with during the war: the desire to find a spiritual justification for the violence necessary in front-line fighting or even through financial support for the war effort from home. In response, the sermons took on a very nationalistic tone, and because of that unique blend, they became tools of propaganda rather than genuine message to call people back to God. And while these sermons did do a great deal to help these individuals heal and understand the horrors that were happening around them, their nationalistic undertones did more to bring people together to support England collectively.

In addition to these nationalistic goals, preachers across the country revived the Christian worldview to overcome socioeconomic boundaries and other disparities in the population as well. In some ways, this was an attempt by the Church to counter the ideas of working-class

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<sup>8</sup>J. Simont, "Church and War: Religion on the Western Front," *Illustrated London News*, September 23, 1916, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0001578/19160923/047/0015?browse=False>

solidarity in favor of overall Christian solidarity. The main way that socioeconomic solidarity was broken down was through the idea of morality and how England needed to restore Christian morals to the enemy. One of these speakers even claimed that England as a whole needed to strive for a world in which “Christ shall have dominion over our whole international life.”<sup>9</sup> By paralleling this conflict to that of others a few decades prior, it is easy to see the connection between the rise in nationalism in the 1800s and the rise in nationalism that the world was experiencing at the time of World War I. Cairns went on to say that, just like countries such as France realized, it was up to English citizens to restore the Kingdom of God, a task much broader than simply practicing the word of God and going to church: restoration was only possible through the reteaching of morality to those in Germany, who had gone astray.<sup>10</sup> At this point, it was no longer enough for the church to say that the people were simply doing it for themselves but rather, it was for the Christian world as a whole. Without religious rhetoric, many individuals may have remained uninvolved, as they had nothing to fight for. The concept of one nation versus another held little meaning or value when it came to the everyday lives of the English people, but when it came to promoting collectively-held values, those involved could achieve a sense of moral superiority and a conviction that their efforts, in the name of England, could restore faith and virtue to the world.

One of the main distinctions that was made by theological scholar Ozora S. Davis near the end of the war was that there was a distinction between Christianity and something known as the Kingdom of God. While Christianity could still be used as a blanket term for numerous denominations, the Kingdom of God represents what many people strove to return to, regardless of their religious affiliation. The Kingdom of God was the idea of a perfect world that whatever

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<sup>9</sup> Randall Thomas Davidson, *Christ: and the World at War*, ed. Basil Matthews, London: J. Clark & Co., 1918, 45.

<sup>10</sup> Davidson and Matthews, *Christ: and the World at War*, 46.

supreme being had laid as the framework for his subjects, and it makes sense that in a time of such turmoil and social upheaval that many would cling to this idea. This concept was also mentioned by Jenkins in his analysis. Despite the time gap of almost a century,, both scholars came to the conclusion that World War I was a religious crusade, during which many Christians, Muslims, and other religious peoples attempted to return to their idea of the Kingdom of God. According to Davis, this desire was extremely prominent in letters and newspaper articles shared during the time.

In his analysis, Davis also noted that religion was extremely prominent amongst troops on the front lines. While he explained that it might not have been “distinctly Christian, so far as it has come to definition,” religious thought was something “real and tangible,” which played a large role in the morale of soldiers at the front. This tied into the overall rise of spirituality and monotheistic beliefs at the time, further debunking the argument that England was not a religious nation. In his article, Davis presents numerous letters in which soldiers wrote that their religious convictions had only deepened by being on the front lines, especially considering the death and horrors surrounding them.<sup>11</sup> Many of the letters and testimonials he included also featured images of dying men crying out to God. The sermons preached and services from the Chaplains aided in this fervor, but it went much further than only happening on the front lines.

The religious conviction gripping England did not necessarily start because of the war, but it nonetheless became a powerful emotional outlet for those hurt and traumatized by the horrors the world faced. Many of the testimonials sent from the front lines encouraged the general public to live this way. Though most analysis focused on the concept of salvation as it related to coping with death and loss, England experienced a parallel movement in which people

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<sup>11</sup> Ozora S. Davis, "Preaching in a World at War. III. Subjects and Suggestions," *The Biblical World* 52, no. 3 (1918): 248-63, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3135988>. 251.

applied salvation as a means “to live.”<sup>12</sup> Some took the war and its violence as a call to reevaluate the way they lived and an opportunity to make Christ a bigger part of their lives. In another account from the front, soldiers described the bonds they created through religion with their fellow combatants: from church services to discussions of faith on the battlefields, shared religious thought created a sense of community. Frequently, that sense of community was described as the closest thing available to the clergy or other religious ceremonies from civilian life. Battlefield faith became the way soldiers lived in the trenches. Since the Kingdom of God was an idea shared both at home and on the front lines, soldiers were met with the same sense of community after returning home. And while these feelings were sometimes exploited by the press to help garner support for the war effort, Christian nationalism did enjoy genuine support from the public.

Similarly, a statement made by the Archbishop of London in one of his many sermons presents an excellent example of the ways preachers and officials attempted to use religion as a call to nationalism.

“As God reaches down His hand to His to find the weapon for the bow which He has made ready, He must find a weapon which He can use. Are we, as a nation, such a weapon?”<sup>13</sup>

This statement, which also ties back to Davis’ ideas on the Kingdom of God, promotes nationalism in a way that implies that, while other Christian nations do exist, England needed to strive to be the most capable of those nations, at least according to the Archbishop of London.

And while this appeal was emotional given its use of religious rhetoric, it also exemplifies how this rhetoric could be blended with nationalism.

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<sup>12</sup> Davis, "Preaching in a World at War. III. Subjects and Suggestions." 252; John G. Inge, "The First World War, Place, and “Home”," In *Life after Tragedy: Essays on Faith and the First World War Evoked by Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy*, ed. Brierley Michael W. and Byrne Georgina A., 37-53, Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2017, doi:10.2307/j.ctvj4sw4c.10. 42-43.

<sup>13</sup> Davidson and Matthews, *Christ: and the World at War*, 135.

This and other similar sermons were critical in reaching ordinary individuals and providing comfort during the challenging times, framing the tragedies common people faced as motivated by a purpose greater than themselves. The theme of loss was prominent in the rhetoric used by some officials, with the Archbishop of Canterbury explicitly stating the English would see “many of our best and bravest gone.”<sup>14</sup> Though dark, it was necessary for these well-respected men to talk about death and sacrifice, as their opinions could encourage people to answer the call. According to Moffat, the two main goals of Christian-sourced propaganda were “to rally the spirit of vital self-sacrifice” and “to keep an edge on the spiritual and moral forces which enter so powerfully into the efficiency of a nation.”<sup>15</sup> Death was inescapable during the time of war, but it was crucial for the public to embrace the belief that this death was not in vain; the heroes going off to battle would become martyrs for the faith and for the country. Moffat’s second point again ties into the idea that morality was a religious view, one that was tied to the nation as a whole. Though not nationalistic outright, the idea of death was seemingly able to bring people together to support one another and those facing death on the front line alike.

In another sermon, this one given by A. E. Garvie, it was suggested that the war was a punishment from God, an idea that was widely held by the working class. Garvie’s handling of the idea, though, mentions that nations were responsible for solving the issue, an idea crucial to nationalism. In the address, Garvie said that the war “will go on until the nations are brought into the moral condition in which they will desire peace rather than a continuance of war.”<sup>16</sup> Garvie could have said that it was up to all Christians or believers in Christ to end the moral atrocities that were occurring during the war, but by bringing the nation into play, he attempts to garner support for England and their war effort, making it seem as though the nation was the only thing

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<sup>14</sup> Davidson and Matthews, *Christ: and the World at War*, 20.

<sup>15</sup> Moffat, “The Influence of the War upon the Religious Life and Thought of Great Britain.” 489.

<sup>16</sup> Davidson and Matthews, *Christ: and the World at War*, 57.

capable of helping the sinners and restoring peace to the world. Religious rhetoric was something that could tie most Englishmen together, even those from diverse economic backgrounds that may have been otherwise incompatible. England finally had a purpose in the war: to be a morally righteous Christian nation, making up for the sins committed by the Germans.

Print propaganda played a large role in accomplishing three goals according to scholar Georgina A. Byrne: countering German aggression, supporting the idea of freedom in a Christian context, and promoting peace according to the Christian worldview, both within England, and across the globe.<sup>17</sup> Like other scholars, the holy war rhetoric is common throughout Byrne's piece, in which it is used as a defense or justification for the fighting. The war was not portrayed as a fight to promote Christianity, but rather one to defend it. Even though soldiers were expected to engage in acts of murder and brutality, the end goal was to promote peace and return the world to a more moral, holy state. Similarly, many of the sermons used as propaganda pieces spoke about topics such as the fact that God had everything under control and that to avoid further suffering, people should avoid vices such as drinking and instead put their faith fully in God and the idea that, as a result of their sacrifices, the world would return to a state of peace. By promoting the idea of peace and looking to the future, these sermons were able to mask any propagandist undertones with a façade of hope and eventual salvation.

The reactions to these sermons, though, were varied, as is demonstrated by numerous newspaper articles published throughout England. As with any form of media, the possibility of bias exists, but the insight these pieces give into the thoughts of the general public on the

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<sup>17</sup> Georgina A. Byrne, "Prophecy or Propaganda?: Preaching in a Time of War." In *Life after Tragedy: Essays on Faith and the First World War Evoked by Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy*, ed. Georgina A. Byrne and Brierley Michael W., 97-115, Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2017, doi:10.2307/j.ctvj4sw4c.13. 101-102.

sermons is useful nonetheless. In a piece posted in the *Burnley News* in 1916, ideas of hope and solidarity - one of the main goals of religious institutions during the time of the war - were expressed. The article went on to say that members of the congregations “joined in the prayer for victory because they conscientiously believe[ed] that [they] are fighting in a just cause and are seeking no ends in which are not approved by every doctrine of [their] faith.”<sup>18</sup> This supports the aforementioned blend of nationalism and religious rhetoric, as they were not just praying for peace or for the war to end, but rather for the victory of England and its Christian allies. Portions of various scriptures and doctrines were used to support these claims, and based on this example, it seems that these messages did reach the everyday people crowding churches every Sunday.

With that being said, some reactions to wartime sermons were less than positive. This is not to say that the backlash originated from non- Christians. Rather, members of various churches believed these sermons were not doing enough, or were conveying the wrong types of ideas to the people at home. In a letter published by *The Fleetwood Chronicle*, the Bishop of Manchester wrote that “the clergy were not as a body making the use that ought to be made of the grave teachings which the war should bring home to the nation as a whole.” He went on to say that the increased church attendance and prayers that were seen at the beginning of the fighting were no more, and that the “self-satisfied and self-confident” tone of the sermons being preached was to blame.<sup>19</sup> This was a stark contrast to some religious figures, who believed that the clergy was taking the messages of war seriously. Regardless of whether the clergy or the preachers were to blame, the call to prayer and worship was not strongly apparent to all.

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<sup>18</sup>“Religion and War,” *Burnley News*, January 6, 1915,  
<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0000699/19150106/073/0004?browse=False>

<sup>19</sup> “The War and Religion,” *Fleetwood Chronicle*, July 2, 1915,  
<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0003239/19150702/023/0002?browse=false>



Similar expressions of disdain towards the Church appeared in an opinion piece published by the paper *John Bull*. These opinions similarly argued that the institution was not doing enough for its members in a time of such great conflict, and even went so far as to compare the institution to Parliament and other political groups that engaged in performative activism for the people they supposedly served. In the piece, the author went on to make a claim that the pulpits were empty save the women and children, claiming the sermons being preached as unattractive to men. The author claimed that the sermons were sad attempts to rally support and a sense of coming-togetherness amongst the entire population. In summary, the Church “failed to show [them] the guiding star in the darkened heavens,” and despite their cries, none of the efforts that had been made had done enough to soothe the broken souls that the war had created.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps this was due to the disconnect between what occurred in the trenches and what was shown to those at home. Maybe these men needed to see the horrors for religious conviction to truly resonate within them and persuade them to enlist. While the activism done by the Church may have appeared compelling, its effect on potential soldiers (rather than women, children, and those who had already enlisted) was perhaps not as great as the Church had hoped.

One of the main modes of attracting men to the service, as seen in the above passage, was the use of religious rhetoric as a means to spark emotion in potential soldiers. For instance, the portrayal of martyrdom, or the idea of dying for a cause, as something heroic or masculine in nature was a common tactic. Using the phrase “guiding star in the darkened heavens” implied that God was calling to men, especially those gone astray from their path or teachings, to a greater purpose. This purpose was fighting for the holy cause and potentially laying their lives down for their country, and while that may have seemed like a hefty task, if these men felt as if

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<sup>20</sup> “Wanted, A New Religion, The Failure of the Churches-The Palsy of the Parsons,” *John Bull*, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0003234/19141128/017/0006?browse=False>

that was their only way to be forgiven of their sins, the sermons would be a very direct way of appealing to the purposeless.

The idea of a gendered approach to religious propaganda was flushed out by Hugh McLeod, and was an integral point in Mark Dorsett's analysis on the national mission of the Church of England. In the relevant chapter, Dorsett summarizes McLeod's analysis about connections between sports and religion, and specifically how the emotional responses felt in relation to both presented themselves in men. According to McLeod, the popularity of sports consumed the leisure time men used to give to Christianity and the Church. An increase in leisure time led to the formation of more organizations, especially for young boys, and as a result of the designation of these new activities as "manly," the idea of masculine Christianity emerged.<sup>21</sup> This concept was especially applicable to wartime, another situation that was considered masculine in nature.

Importantly, McLeod notes that men did not swap religion for sports. Rather, he posits that the development of new societal norms such as manliness, along with an increase in leisure time, actively changed the religious landscape of England. When combined with the war, these factors blended with nationalism to generate a response that encouraged the whole nation to engage with patriotic and religious rhetoric. The Church needed to create rhetoric that fit the rise of masculinity. Thus, many of the messages and images produced by the church mentioned dying, martyrdom, and being a hero for one's country. By promoting patriotism as manly as well as Christian, it became much easier to get men to enlist, and more generally to believe in England as a promoter of a Christian worldview to those gone astray. All of these factors

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<sup>21</sup> Hugh McLeod, "Religion and Society," quoted in Mark Dorsett, "National Mission," *Life After Tragedy: Essays on Faith and the First World War Evoked by Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy*, ed. Byrne Georgina A. and Brierley Michael W., 97-115. Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2017, doi:10.2307/j.ctvj4sw4c.13. 101-102.

combined created an opportunity for a unique blend of propaganda pieces that addressed many social changes that were happening across England.

Building on that foundation, the sermons preached directly to soldiers on the front lines expanded on the emotional appeal of faith mentioned in propaganda at home. In an account from a soldier posted in *North Down Herald and County Down Independent*, the author describes the religious fervor that often gripped those who went on watch, both at night and during the day. Many of these men did not know what dangers might come their way during their solitary watches, so they turned their nervous energy toward God, hoping he might reward them, or at the very least get them out of any tricky situations alive. According to the letter he posted, prayers were full of fervor and sincerity, and many of those sentiments originated from chaplains and special services sent to them from home.<sup>22</sup> With that being said, it raises the point that perhaps these sermons were not hitting as hard because the people at home were not getting a complete understanding of the terrors that were occurring on the battlefield. Though there were definitely some instances that aligned themselves more closely with performative activism, the ability for disconnect between the soldiers and those at home is definitely something that should be taken into consideration.

To ease those disconnects, many churches put on “War Teas,” hoping to bring the community together and promote faith through wartime actions of the Church. One such tea was advertised in the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* and took place at a South Parish Church. According to one of the reverends in attendance, there was a great deal of optimism and giving at the event. He stated that everyone came to the conclusion that prayers from the people at home

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<sup>22</sup> “The End Our Soldiers Want,” *North Down Herald and County Down Independent*, December 28, 1918, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0002546/19181228/069/0005>.

and efforts to help gather enough supplies were still crucial, but morale was high, and many were willing to do all they could to support the soldiers and the mission of the nation as a whole.<sup>23</sup>

Christianity was only one part of the successful propaganda that generated support for the war. Religious rhetoric was combined with nationalistic ideologies to create a unique Christian nationalist rhetoric, in which other countries were villainized as enemies of Christ. For example, the government and the church achieved this goal by painting Germany as a pagan enemy that had strayed from the ideals of Christianity. By depicting Germany as a nation of non-believers, and in some cases even the Antichrist, it became much easier to justify going to war and committing acts that would not normally be permitted under God's rule. In her analysis, Aimee Barbeau noted how the clergy scolded Germany for their militarily-driven goals and their emphasis on the nation over morality.<sup>24</sup> After Germany had been vilified, and practices such as modernism and secularism had been painted in a bad light by the opposition, it was easy for the church to step in as a moral leader. The Bible was accepted - for the most part - as a book of morals. Thus, it was up to the institution of the Church to promote the ideal of returning to a Christian world and correcting those who had gone astray. One newspaper article stated that "religion was the power which would alone develop the human spirit to its maximum pitch." By placing emphasis on the human spirit, the church appealed to nationalism by first appealing to the greater good of the human race. England was depicted as having the power to restore the Christian human spirit to Germany and her allies, and because of that ability, it became the responsibility of the English to support their country and do everything that they could to ensure

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<sup>23</sup> "South Parish Church War Tea. Comforts for Our Soldiers," *Aberdeen Press and Journal*. November 27, 1916, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000576/19161127/106/0006>

<sup>24</sup> Aimee Barbeau, "Christian Empire and National Crusade: The Rhetoric of Anglican Clergy in the First World War," *Anglican & Episcopal History* 85 no. 1 (March 2016): 24–62, <https://search-ebscohost-com.libproxy.chapman.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,uid&db=hia&AN=114157306&site=eds-live>; "The Duty of the Church," *Northern Whig*, June 3, 1919, <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/BL/0000434/19190603/135/0006?browse=False>

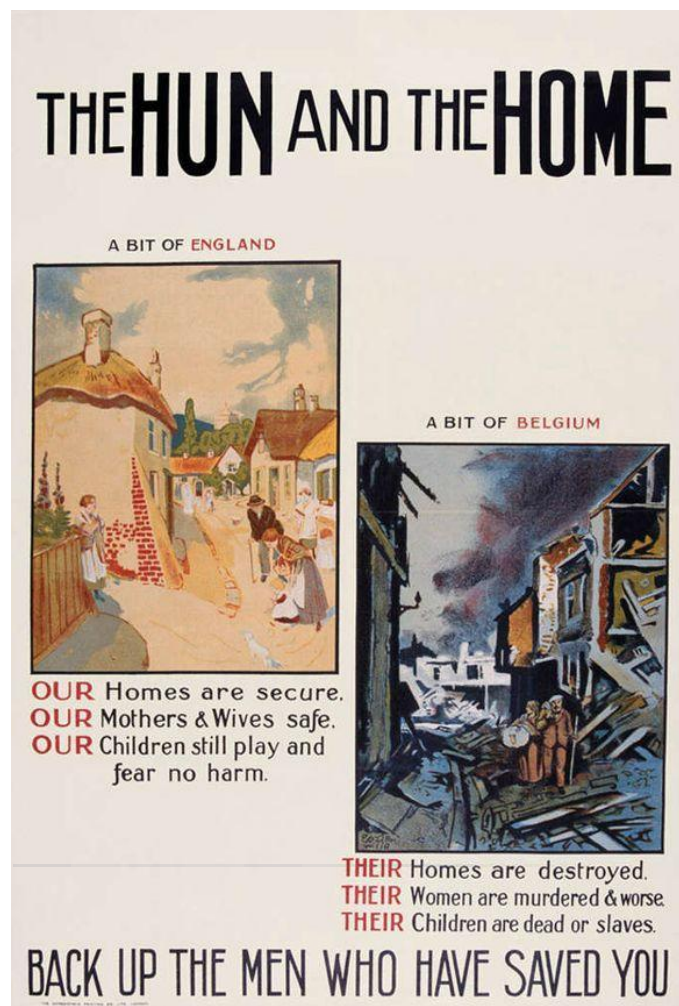
victory. This subtle thought seems to have good intentions, but by appealing to the pathos of the general public the Church managed to disguise a political agenda as a moral one.

Art with religious undertones was another way the Church and state worked hand in hand to villainize Germany and rally support for the English national effort. One image entitled “Red Cross or Iron Cross” depicts a German nurse denying an English captive the water he desperately needs. The propaganda piece was created by the Red Cross Association in an attempt to get support for the war effort. The caption of the image points out the nurse is a “sister,” since many nuns and church women volunteered to be nurses on the front lines.



This image brought up many of the atrocities that churchgoers deemed to be immoral and against the Kingdom of God. For one, it shows a sister, someone who is supposed to be compassionate and uphold strict moral values, act despicably. Her actions aggressively depict the idea that the Germans were immoral and needed to be stopped. The second portion of the caption, which mentions the women of Britain never forgetting, served as a call to action intended to bring women together against one common enemy. The creation of one common enemy that went against the collective moral and religious values of the group, made it easy for the Church to create a national mission rooted in religious ethos that most of England could agree on.

Another striking anti-German image created to help with the foundation of nationalism was a piece entitled “The Hun and The Home.”



This image showed the atrocities that the Germans were committing abroad, and like the previous image, tried to liken them to something that was familiar to most - in this case, the Hun. Comparing the Germans to a group commonly understood as barbaric and ruthless tugged at the heartstrings of the English and encouraged them to rally together in opposition against the attackers. And while this image was not explicitly religious, it can still be seen as a piece that was used to vilify the Germans and strengthen the desire to return to the Kingdom of God. By depicting the atrocities that the Germans were committing using language that made England seem like the moral savior, the poster presents a solid link between morality and Church teachings.

Even though Germany was demonized and made to look like the enemy, it still took a great deal of work to be able to raise these nationalist sentiments within the English people. At the beginning of the century, many of the places in Europe that had secularized were the urban and industrial areas. There were still many, however, who lived in rural farming areas. The disconnect between these groups made finding a common ground difficult. Many people in the working class had, by virtue of their socioeconomic standing, more in common with the enemy Germans than they did with other individuals of the same nationality.<sup>25</sup> The idea of returning to the Christian worldview took hold of preachers across the country and helped overcome this socioeconomic boundary. In some ways, it was an attempt by the Church to counter the ideas of working-class solidarity. One of these speakers even claimed that England as a whole needed to strive for a world in which “Christ shall have dominion over or whole international life.”<sup>26</sup> By paralleling this conflict to that of others a few decades prior, it is easy to see the connection

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<sup>25</sup> Neville Kirk, "World War I and Its Aftermath," In *Transnational Radicalism and the Connected Lives of Tom Mann and Robert Samuel Ross*, 226-44, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017, [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1ps32qj.14](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1ps32qj.14).

<sup>26</sup> Randall Thomas Davidson, ed and Basil Matthews, ed, *Christ: and the World at War*. London: J. Clark & Co., 1918, 45.

between the rise in nationalism in the 1800s and the rise in nationalism that the world was experiencing now. Cairns went on to say that it was now up to England to restore the Kingdom of God. And while there is no compelling evidence to suggest that the Church of England was outright attacking another institution, it seems as though they believed Christians in enemy countries had lost sight of the core values of the faith. Thus, the Kingdom of God and those core values could be restored by reteaching morality to those in Germany that had gone astray.<sup>27</sup> At this point, it was no longer enough for the church to say that the people were simply doing it for themselves but rather, for the Christian world as a whole. Without religious rhetoric, many individuals may not have gotten involved, for they had nothing to fight for. Nation versus nation really held no value when it came to their everyday lives, but when it came to promoting values that they all held to a certain extent, sharing those with the world gave them a sense of moral superiority and that their efforts, in the name of England, could restore faith and virtue to the world.

While clergymen in both Germany and England had good standing with one another in the years leading up to the war, English propaganda was quick to use Christian morality as a means of vilifying the German view of religion. Barbeau's analysis mentions that, while the two churches initially felt closely linked to one another, with many delegations exchanged between the two right before the war, those feelings were short-lived; it wouldn't take long for stories of German atrocities to emerge and for Anglicans to quickly denounce their German brothers and sisters. The Church believed that Germany's actions, such as invading and occupying foreign countries, were outdated and barbaric, and they were appalled by the fact that they had seemingly put all morals aside for the well-being of the nation-state.<sup>28</sup> This again ties back into

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<sup>27</sup> Davidson and Matthews, *Christ: and the World at War*, 46.

<sup>28</sup> Barbeau, "Christian Empire and National Crusade," 36-37.



the idea of the Kingdom of God and the fact that England and her other allies desired a worldwide moral standard rooted in Christian values. If the Anglican clergy felt that Germany did not meet these standards, it only made sense to cut them off quickly and replace their messages of love and support with ones filled with anti-German rhetoric.

The anti-German rhetoric used by the Church did not just deal with religious issues. It also had the power to overcome its original scope by influencing opinions on class standing and socioeconomic issues between the English and the Germans. Religious nationalism overcame these boundaries due to how bloodthirsty and Crusade-like it became. In his piece, Jenkins notes that England did see a resurgence of violent holy war rhetoric during World War I. Many prominent religious figures, such as priests and bishops, believed it was up to England to save the Christian world from foreign invaders, and used England as a beacon of hope emerging from the darkness created by places straying from the word of God, like Germany. In some regards, the blunt, nationalistic propaganda was necessary, as many English elites were known to sympathize with German elites over their similar socioeconomic statuses.<sup>29</sup> By othering the Germans and their allies and turning war into a religious crusade, it became easier for these individuals to put those similarities aside, instead focusing on the moral differences that divided them. Those religious differences, blown out of proportion, were enough to create national fervor within England.

This rhetoric may have seemed extreme at first -especially to those who had no pre existing issues with the Germans - any socioeconomic similarities were soon pushed aside to make room for years of this strong anti-German propaganda. Building off of the idea that the propaganda became almost crusade-like, many individuals that helped pioneer the anti-German message argued that German military practices were outdated and barbaric, like ones that were

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<sup>29</sup> Jenkins, *The Great and Holy War*. 71-72.

used centuries before in the Crusades. And while places such as England and France were brutal in the descriptions of their enemies, particularly in the war's early days, the anti-German rhetoric soon shifted to a type rooted in the idea that they had strayed from the true meaning of Christianity, not necessarily condemning German economics or politics. In his analysis, Jenkins also notes that some propaganda pieces described England as knights in shining armor, saving the Christian world from those who had turned their backs on God. This religious imagery had the power to provoke a great deal of emotion within the English, and the more that the state could use this to their advantage, the easier it became to create a national message all could agree with.<sup>30</sup>

Religious rhetoric might have started at home, but these ideas manifested in many ways on the front lines. One of the most direct yet difficult ways the English government used religion as a tool to please English citizens was through the work of chaplains in the field. Much of the propaganda used throughout the fighting promoted ideas such as the promise of eternal salvation in exchange for dying for England, or other spiritual benefits from fighting in the war. This rhetoric was successful in uniting citizens, but providing proof of salvation was more difficult than simply saying so. Thus, chaplain work was a critical part of harnessing the religious fervor that gripped soldiers in the trenches and promoting ideas of war martyrdom. Religion was also used as a means to explain the unexplainable, and help English soldiers cope with emotions that were too great for humans to handle on their own. This was true of many religions, but these patterns were particularly prevalent in wartime Christianity. In his analysis, Jenkins notes that much of the religious language used on the battlefield was extreme in nature. Soldiers were not afraid to become martyrs in the name of God because they believed that they would go to Heaven after dying for their country. Similarly, as the war dragged on and the death toll grew,

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<sup>30</sup> Jenkins, *The Great and Holy War*, 20; Jenkins, *The Great and Holy War*, 72.

many described it as Armageddon, and genuinely believed that God was punishing them for an abundance of sin. Similarly, many soldiers aligned themselves with the idea of fatalism because of the brutality of everything they saw, codified by the popular saying, “if your name is on the shell you will get it.”<sup>31</sup> The Christian thinking used to persuade soldiers to enlist was then taken to fatalistic extremes once soldiers made it to combat.

Even though the messages that were preached at home touched on the themes of martyrdom and death, nothing prepared these men for what they would witness on the front lines. No matter how hard the Church and state tried to relate to the soldiers and frame their sacrifices in a positive light, the reality of the front lines was not as spiritual or chivalric as it had been made out to be. Many soldiers noted that they felt as if the Church could not relate to their experiences on the front lines and that the messages sent to those at home were more happy-go-lucky interpretations of what actually occurred. A great deal of this disdain for the Church also came from the common belief that the Church Cared more about the institution and nationalism than the men that they were persuading to go out and fight. Thus, general distrust amongst soldiers on the front lines for the institution itself was common.<sup>32</sup>

The soldiers were not completely dissatisfied with all the Church did on the front lines, though. Chaplains, while not directly involved in the fighting, saw a great deal of bloodshed, and often relayed final messages from men on the front lines. An account posted in the North Down Herald and County Down Independent supported Jenkins’ and Shaw’s analysis about the religious nature of men and the fatalist approach that they often took. In this account, a chaplain stated that he believed “nearly all live partly by faith in a good God. I have never found men afraid to die, even though they were afraid before battle.” Not only were these men religious and

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<sup>31</sup> Jenkins, *The Great and Holy War*, 14-16.; Shaw, “Faith, Belief and Superstition,” <https://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/faith-belief-and-superstition>.

<sup>32</sup> Barbeau, “Christian Empire and National Crusade,” 41-42.

faithful, but the propaganda that promised salvation also allayed fears of death and made soldiers more willing to die for the cause. Chaplain programs were successful when it came to supporting soldiers and furthering these ideals on the front lines as well as providing numerous services to soldiers. Many of the chaplains serving took dying messages and offered religious support to those passing after sustaining wounds in battle. Some chaplains also gave sermons, even though those services were somewhat unorganized and limited to a choice few religions. Some Anglican clergy chaplains even won numerous awards for their bravery, something that would eventually help the Church stand out for its hard work.<sup>33</sup>

Overall, it is clear that religion was a key component of England's efforts in World War I. While many scholars would go on to make varying assumptions about the level of religiosity within England and the changing landscape of the overall world, the data show that, while the country was becoming more diverse and religiously tolerant, Anglicanism remained a prominent force. And while the world might have become increasingly secular, England still maintained deep Christian values, ingrained in society and strengthened by the catastrophic events of the war. While it might seem like something that would be too outdated for the turn of a century in which the world was modernizing at a rapid pace, the Church and state were still very closely intertwined with one another.

Knowing that religious imagery would resonate with the general public, the Church worked to create propaganda that would inspire and motivate men to enlist in the army and support the cause, as well as the women at home to do what they could to provide help and resources to the front lines. The religious ideas dominating these propaganda pieces included images of angels on battlefields and speeches filled with descriptive messages about martyrdom

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<sup>33</sup> "The End Our Soldiers Want."; Snape. "Reconsidering British Religion and the First World War." In *Life after Tragedy: Essays on Faith and the First World War Evoked by Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy*, ed. Brierley Michael W. and Byrne Georgina A.

and the salvation received by those who died for their country and fought for a return to a Christian worldview. The propaganda was also filled with anti-German messages, portraying the enemy as heathens who had strayed from the messages of God. The only way to prove to God that England was worthy was to fight against these heathens and try and bring them back to the light.

The chaplains sent to the front lines continued this work and offered soldiers support in their final moments, and while there was no doubt that “trench religion” required little convincing when it came to soldiers' faith, the chaplains were still important messengers, sharing stories from the front with those back home and using their experiences to help garner support from those who were not out fighting. Similarly, sermons played a large role when it came to spreading the message about joining the national effort and supporting England, and while responses to these sermons varied, they generally were a strong propaganda tool that helped deliver wartime-specific religious messages. Not only were they a strong tool to make sure that the Church stayed in favor, but the way that religion was used during the war helped transform nationalism into a unique Christian nationalism in which England was seen as a savior.

In examining copious amounts of religious propaganda and rhetoric from the war period, the bulk of World War I historiography captures some of the picture, but not the most holistic one. Though other scholars have begun to delve into religious changes and their resulting social and political consequences in England during the conflict, not many have examined what strong impacts they had on the war's course. England was still a very religious nation indeed, and the Christian ideals still held so strongly were key in both the country's initial wartime response and the way nationalism developed as a response to the fighting. World War I had no singular cause, but the ways in which the numerous small causes interacted with one another are crucial to

understanding the war holistically. The changing religious and social landscape at the turn of the century played a large role in the outbreak of the conflict and the subsequent ways that it was handled, and since the religious landscape was still a prominent factor in English society, it is unfair to leave it out of World War I analysis.

Some, like Philip Jenkins, would go as far to say that World War I was a holy war, in which the whole point was to rid the world of sinners and promote a united, worldwide Christian ideology. Other scholars argue that the war was caused by numerous political alliances that got too messy and an array of technological advancements that made conflict inevitable. And while it might be difficult to come to a definitive conclusion or cause for the war, it is clear that the numerous perspectives in conversation with one another create useful analysis that can be used to understand the war holistically. While debates as to what extent religion motivated the war still exist, Christianity and the Church of England played a large role in the war and the approach that the nation as a whole took to manage the conflict.

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