

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03514-0 - Catholicism and the Great War: Religion and Everyday  
Life in Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914–1922

Patrick J. Houlihan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

---

On August 20, 1914, the invading German Army entered Brussels, marching through Belgium and into northern France. Also on that day, Pope Saint Pius X, the declared anti-modernist “peasant pope,” died suddenly after a short illness. Soon after, in the midst of unfolding war, cardinals from across Europe gathered in Rome to elect the new supreme pontiff, and the mood was anxious. At the conclave in the corridors of the Vatican, Cardinal Felix von Hartmann of Germany greeted his colleague Cardinal Désiré Mercier of Belgium, saying, “I hope that we shall not speak of war.” Mercier responded, “And I hope that we shall not speak of peace.”<sup>1</sup> The national rancor between bishops would escalate as the war dragged on, and episcopal enmity and clerical nationalism have become cultural shorthand for the religious experience of the Great War. However, the sound and fury of the bishops has helped to conceal the experiences of ordinary religious believers.

This book argues that, seen through the religious experiences of everyday Catholics from the losing powers, the Catholic story of the Great War challenges standard interpretations of the war’s disillusioning legacy. In particular, the study of lived religion for people from the losing powers provides counter-narratives to stories of secularization and artistic modernism. Specifically Catholic forms of belief and practice allowed Catholics in the losing powers to cope with the war’s devastation remarkably better than standard cultural histories of secularization and literary modernism would have readers believe. This Catholic spirituality included intercession, sacramentality, dolorous cyclical history in the long term, and worship of female spirituality. These modes of faith provided relief and comfort in extreme situations of distress. Catholic spirituality, both liturgically and theologically, provided traditional means of

<sup>1</sup> The exchange between the cardinals is recounted in Michael Burleigh, *Earthly Powers: The Clash of Religion and Politics in Europe from the French Revolution to the Great War* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 457. For the official documents on the conclave, see Anon., *Acta Apostolicae Sedis: Commentarium Officiale* (Rome: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1909–), 6:473–500.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03514-0 - Catholicism and the Great War: Religion and Everyday  
Life in Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914–1922

Patrick J. Houlihan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 2 Catholicism and the Great War

understanding tremendous upheaval, allowing the Great War's devastating new horrors to be relativized as one episode in the story of human existence. Catholicism portrayed war as necessary suffering, diminished belief in divine-right nationalism, and created a nostalgic vision of idyllic domesticity. While the homefront vision may have been delusive, it was nonetheless a powerful motivator and source of hope, especially in the war-torn world struggling to rebuild itself during the interwar period.

This book goes beyond instrumental and functional analyses that reduce religion to an epiphenomenon. Instead, it argues that Catholics from the losing powers had a wide and deep variety of autonomous, meaningful, and irreducible religious experiences. Using a personalized source base of reports, letters, diaries, and memoirs, the book explores how religious believers adjusted to the new industrial warfare in various contexts: ecclesiastical, imperial, national, local, and personal. Revising Church-oriented histories of the bishops and clergy that focus on clerical nationalism and "just war" theology, it incorporates the perspectives of not only soldiers at the battlefield but also women and children on the homefront, viewed comparatively and transnationally in the context of two different empires, with Catholics a favored majority in Austria-Hungary and a suspect minority in Germany.

Throughout history, religion's relation to violence and war can be seen as both classical and contemporary.<sup>2</sup> With reference to the Great War, the study of religion taps into historiographical debates about the nature of consent and coercion; enthusiasm and remobilization after the failure of an early decisive victory; and the nature of ideology as both incitement of hatred and source of social pacification. As Hew Strachan and Jay Winter, among others, have argued, the historiography of the Great War has reached a new transnational threshold, but national histories remain deeply entrenched.<sup>3</sup> For Austria-Hungary, condemned to declining irrelevance before the conflict began, the war provides a convenient narrative end point for the shattering of a seemingly incoherent jumble of ethnicities. For Germany, the Great War is a prelude to the destructive vengeance of the Nazi movement.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> For an excellent overview, see Mark Juergensmeyer, Margo Kitts, and Michael Jerryson, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Hew Strachan, "Epilogue," in *The Legacy of the Great War: Ninety Years On*, ed. Jay Winter (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2009), 185–98; Jay Winter, "Approaching the History of the Great War: A User's Guide," in Winter, *The Legacy of the Great War*, 1–17, esp. 6–7.

<sup>4</sup> For a superlative historiographical overview, see Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03514-0 - Catholicism and the Great War: Religion and Everyday  
Life in Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914–1922

Patrick J. Houlihan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The First World War had a Catholic dimension that has not received attention as a pan-European phenomenon, especially for the losing powers of Central and Eastern Europe. Aside from high-level diplomacy and research on the radical right-wing fringe, very few studies of the Great War view Germany and Austria-Hungary together as related but distinct entities.<sup>5</sup> Although religiosity is difficult to quantify, even the sheer empirical data on nominal religious affiliation suggest the need to examine a Catholic experience of the war: according to one set of figures from 1920, those nominally identified as Catholics made up 194.83 million of a total European population of 353.57 million people, or 55.10%. The regional data are even more pronounced, especially viewed in terms of Protestant–Catholic differences. In Central Europe, Catholics made up 59.99 million out of a total of 114.90 million people, or 52.21%, while Protestants made up 44.90 million, or 39.08%. Regional disparities in Eastern and Southern Europe, long-neglected areas of First World War studies, are more lopsided. In Eastern Europe, Catholics represented 12.93 million out of 43.08 million total inhabitants, or 30.01%, whereas Protestants made up 3.61 million, or 8.38%. In Southern Europe, Catholics formed 66.28 million out of a total of 75.41 million, or an overwhelming 87.89%, whereas Protestants numbered around 168 000, or a mere 0.22%.<sup>6</sup>

Why, then, does one find this neglect of a major component of belief during a transformative global event? As Michael Snape has argued, the Christian history of the First World War remains understudied because of a narrow national or denominational focus;<sup>7</sup> the present book aims to correct this for the losing powers. There is also the issue of the war’s cultural legacy, in large part dominated by representations of avant garde modernism. Many cultural histories of the war argue that the dominant master-narrative of its cultural legacy is, in the pointed words of Modris Eksteins, the emergence of “orgiastic-nihilistic irony,” with

<sup>5</sup> The neglect of comparative studies of the losing powers is striking, especially in comparison to works about Britain and France. For a pioneering countervailing work, see Holger H. Herwig, *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914–1918* (London: Arnold, 1997). An important recent transnational study of counter-revolutionary movements in Central Europe is Robert Gerwarth, “The Central European Counter-Revolution: Paramilitary Violence in Germany, Austria and Hungary after the Great War,” *Past and Present* 200, no. 1 (2008): 175–209.

<sup>6</sup> These statistics are taken from Gabriel Adriányi, ed., *History of the Church*, vol. 10: *The Church in the Modern Age* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 5–6. Figures originally taken from H. A. Kroese, ed. *Kirchliches Handbuch für das katholische Deutschland*, vol. 7, 1930–1 (Cologne, 1931), 263.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Snape, “The Great War,” in *World Christianities, c.1914–c.2000*, ed. Hugh McLeod (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 131–50. For brief preliminary studies that indicate a historiographic shift is imminent, see Martin Greschat, *Der Erste Weltkrieg und die Christenheit. Ein globaler Überblick* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2014).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03514-0 - Catholicism and the Great War: Religion and Everyday  
Life in Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914–1922

Patrick J. Houlihan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 4 Catholicism and the Great War

Germany “the modernist nation par excellence” of the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> Tempering this view, Jay Winter’s path-breaking work of comparative and transnational cultural history demonstrates the persistence of traditional motifs and means of understanding, particularly the modes of classical, romantic, and religious culture. On a pan-European level, Winter argues that traditional ways of representation provided comfort, helping bereaved survivors mourn the dead and thus cope with human loss on an unprecedented scale.<sup>9</sup> Despite the more recent pull of studies of popular culture, given the impact of modernism, there is still a strong tendency to view culture in terms of high culture.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, the religious history of the war has now become an established component of its cultural history. Annette Becker’s pioneering book on Catholic France, *War and Faith: The Religious Imagination in France, 1914–1930*, represented a new approach to the cultural history of religion during the war, deliberately focusing on the religious experiences of lay believers and thus counterbalancing the previous dominance of the papacy and priests.<sup>11</sup> After the historiographical cultural turn in First World War studies, powerful recent histories of religion have stressed the power of religion as an enduring source of identity for everyday believers; however, these studies are largely limited to the framework of a single nation-state.<sup>12</sup> Recent histories of religion in the capital cities of Paris, London, and Berlin have shown that even paramount centers of modernism should not inherently be categorized as engines of secularization during the war.<sup>13</sup> Further complicating cultural stereotypes about the experience of the First World War grounded in the archetypal hellish

<sup>8</sup> Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), xiv–xvi. For a seminal work about the Great War as a foundational moment in the emergence of literary modernism, see Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

<sup>9</sup> Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the essays in Aviel Roshwald and Richard Stites, eds., *European Culture in the Great War: The Arts, Entertainment, and Propaganda, 1914–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> Annette Becker, *War and Faith: The Religious Imagination in France, 1914–1930*, trans. Helen McPhail (Oxford: Berg, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> In addition to Annette Becker’s *War and Faith*, see Jonathan H. Ebel, *Faith in the Fight: Religion and the American Soldier in the Great War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), and Michael Snape, *God and the British Soldier: Religion and the British Army in the First and Second World Wars* (London: Routledge, 2005). For a work that blends analysis of the USA and the UK, see Richard Schweitzer, *The Cross and the Trenches: Religious Faith and Doubt among British and American Great War Soldiers* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Adrian Gregory and Annette Becker, “Religious Sites and Practices,” in *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin*, vol. 2: *A Cultural History*, ed. Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 383–427.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03514-0 - Catholicism and the Great War: Religion and Everyday  
Life in Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914–1922

Patrick J. Houlihan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

landscape of the Western Front trenches, Alexander Watson's effective recent study of combat motivation and morale in the British and German armies firmly argues that endurance, not psychological collapse, was the normative condition of most soldiers fighting at the front. Watson highlights religion as a key factor in explaining this endurance. He argues that, "For most [soldiers], religion or superstition lent sense and meaning to the chaotic environment and offered an opportunity of imposing order on it. The human capacity for hope, optimism and, not least, self-deception made the war subjectively less threatening and lent men peculiar powers of resilience."<sup>14</sup> The archetypal hopeless, hellish anomie in the trenches of the Western Front simply does not adequately represent the variety of ways people experienced the war.

In Europe and around the world, societies drew upon religion to make sense of the Great War. Focusing on the global reordering of the twentieth century, Philip Jenkins has recently written, "Religion is essential to understanding the war, to understanding why people went to war, what they hoped to achieve through war, and why they stayed at war."<sup>15</sup> The study of religion during wartime must study both similarities and differences within a global framework. Overall, as Adrian Gregory has recently written, wartime religion should be "highly sensitive to the nuances and complexities of actual religions in their practices and beliefs." While the concept of religion should be analytically limited (and not all-encompassing and circular), nevertheless, "religious practices, languages, and imagery were intimately engaged in making sense of 'war experience.'"<sup>16</sup>

Yet, for religion in Central Europe, the historiographical teleology of modernization and Nazism remains strong: Weberian disenchantment followed by the substitute messianism of Adolf Hitler. For religious history in Central Europe, the story moves quickly from 1914 to 1933. George S. Williamson has argued that, despite qualifications, the religious history of Central Europe is dominated by a Protestant *Sonderweg*.<sup>17</sup> As Mark Lilla's recent appraisal of religiosity *The Stillborn God* admits,

<sup>14</sup> Alexander Watson, *Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 234; see esp. pp. 92–100.

<sup>15</sup> Philip Jenkins, *The Great and Holy War: How World War I Became a Religious Crusade* (New York: HarperOne, 2014).

<sup>16</sup> Adrian Gregory, "Beliefs and Religion," in *The Cambridge History of the First World War*, ed. Jay Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 3:418–44; quote from 443.

<sup>17</sup> George S. Williamson, "A Religious Sonderweg? Reflections on the Sacred and the Secular in the Historiography of Modern Germany," *Church History* 75, no. 1 (2006): 139–56.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03514-0 - Catholicism and the Great War: Religion and Everyday  
Life in Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914–1922

Patrick J. Houlihan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 6 Catholicism and the Great War

the story of secularization is often a tale of legacies of Protestantism and Judaism, with Catholicism left out.<sup>18</sup> Applied to First World War studies, the “war cultures” approach relies on a notion of ideological crusade between combatants, which accentuates religious cultural difference and uses Protestant Prussia as the reductive symbol for Germany. While the crusading element was certainly one important part of religious belief, the focus on combatant animosity tends to highlight escalating brutality, especially of occupied regions, as a formative period for genocide.<sup>19</sup>

In the historiography of Central European Catholicism on the eve of the Great War, the milieu remains an analytical starting point. Despite many advances, the work on the milieu often highlights the ghettoization of Catholic historiography within Central Europe. Contrasted with the permeation of Roman Catholicism, both officially and unofficially, in Austria-Hungary, as a minority religion in Protestant-dominated Germany the Catholic milieu was a defensive subculture that provided a life-world for believers, eventually, at the national level, translating into the political power of the Center Party.<sup>20</sup> The top-down reassertion of papal primacy known as “ultramontanism,” in its extreme form, gave rise to the model in which the priest was “manager” of the milieu.<sup>21</sup> The Franco-Prussian War did not last long enough to create a true sense of shared suffering capable of integrating Protestants and Catholics.<sup>22</sup> By contrast, the enormous bloodletting of the Great War would help to

<sup>18</sup> Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West* (New York: Knopf, 2007).

<sup>19</sup> For a recent statement of the “war cultures” approach to religion, see Annette Becker, “Faith, Ideologies, and the ‘Cultures of War,’” in *A Companion to World War I*, ed. John Horne (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 234–47. For the “war cultures” approach more generally, see Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14–18: Understanding the Great War*, trans. Catherine Temerson (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002).

<sup>20</sup> For a recent review article that expertly outlines debates about the twentieth-century transformation of the Catholic milieu in Central Europe, ultimately arguing for the milieu’s analytical viability in terms of “lived religion,” see Michael E. O’Sullivan, “From Catholic Milieu to Lived Religion: The Social and Cultural History of Modern German Catholicism,” *History Compass* 7, no. 3 (2009): 837–61. Earlier foundational statements include Münster Arbeitskreis für kirchliche Zeitgeschichte, “Katholiken zwischen Tradition und Moderne: Das katholische Milieu als Forschungsaufgabe,” *Westfälische Forschungen* 43 (1993): 588–654, and Oded Heilbronner, “From Ghetto to Ghetto: The Place of German Catholic Society in Recent Historiography,” *Journal of Modern History* 72, no. 2 (2000): 453–95.

<sup>21</sup> Olaf Blaschke, “Die Kolonialisierung der Laienwelt: Priester als Milieumanager und die Kanäle klerikaler Kuratel,” in *Religion im Kaiserreich: Milieus, Mentalitäten, Krisen*, ed. Olaf Blaschke and Frank-Michael Kuhlemann (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 93–135.

<sup>22</sup> Christian Rak, *Krieg, Nation und Konfession: die Erfahrung des deutsch-französischen Krieges von 1870/71* (Paderborn: F. Schöningh, 2004).



Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03514-0 - Catholicism and the Great War: Religion and Everyday  
Life in Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914–1922

Patrick J. Houlihan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

7

fuse confessional differences along a model of Christian sacrifice for the nation, which also accentuated the exclusion of Jews from the national community.

Standard accounts of Catholicism in Central Europe during the Great War focus on the bishops, and particularly their aggressive “war theology” in defense of interests of state. These tend to represent war experience solely through published war sermons circulated in pastoral letters and published in religious periodicals.<sup>23</sup> Even religious histories of the churches during the war tended to focus on the actions of the bishops in a very top-down fashion.<sup>24</sup> Because of its accessible source base and readily identifiable actors, military chaplaincy has provided a way for talking about religion in a largely military context at the battlefield.<sup>25</sup> Thus, despite historiographical shifts that argue for essential connections between homefront and battlefield, religion in Central Europe during the war is often represented through the perspectives of the military administrative state and the leading churchmen psychologically invested in it, thus instrumentalizing religion and privileging the nation-state. The focus on church men also highlights the extent to which the religious history of Central Europe has been largely gendered by exclusively

<sup>23</sup> Wilhelm Achleitner, *Gott im Krieg: Die Theologie der österreichischen Bischöfe in den Hirtenbriefen zum Ersten Weltkrieg* (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 1997); Karl Hammer, *Deutsche Kriegstheologie, 1870–1918* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1974); Heinrich Missalla, “Gott mit uns”: *Die deutsche katholische Kriegspredigt, 1914–1918* (Munich: Kösel Verlag, 1968); Wilhelm Pressel, *Die Kriegspredigt 1914–1918 in der evangelischen Kirche Deutschlands* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1967).

<sup>24</sup> Heinz Hürten, “Die katholische Kirche im Ersten Weltkrieg,” in *Der erste Weltkrieg: Wirkung, Wahrnehmung, Analyse*, ed. Wolfgang Michalka (Munich: Piper Verlag, 1994), 725–35; Richard van Dülmen, “Der deutsche Katholizismus und der Erste Weltkrieg,” *Francia* 2 (1974): 347–76. More recently, see Martin Lätzel, *Die katholische Kirche im Ersten Weltkrieg. Zwischen Nationalismus und Friedenswillen* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 2014).

<sup>25</sup> For an overview of military chaplaincy in both the Habsburg and the Hohenzollern monarchies, see Patrick J. Houlihan, “Clergy in the Trenches: Catholic Military Chaplains of Germany and Austria-Hungary during the First World War” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 2011). See also Claudia Ham, “Von den Anfängen der Militärseelsorge bis zur Liquidierung des Apostolischen Feldvikariates im Jahr 1918,” in *Zwischen Himmel und Erde: Militärseelsorge in Österreich*, ed. Roman-Hans Gröger (Graz: Styria Verlag, 2001), 13–98; Arnold Vogt, *Religion im Militär: Seelsorge zwischen Kriegsverherrlichung und Humanität: Eine militär-geschichtliche Studie* (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 1984); and Benjamin Ziemann, “Katholische Religiosität und die Bewältigung des Krieges: Soldaten und Militärseelsorger in der deutschen Armee, 1914–1918,” in *Völkreligiosität und Kriegserleben*, ed. Friedhelm Boll (Münster: Lit, 1997), 116–36. The published diaries of chaplains, with valuable scholarly commentary, are also an excellent source. See Frank Betker and Almut Kriele, eds., *Pro fide et patria! Die Kriegstagebücher von Ludwig Berg 1914/18: Katholischer Feldgeistlicher im Grossen Hauptquartier Kaiser Wilhelms II* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1998), and Hans-Josef Wollasch, ed., *Militärseelsorge im Ersten Weltkrieg: Das Kriegstagebuch des katholischen Feldgeistlichen Benedict Kreuz* (Mainz: Matthias Grünewelt Verlag, 1987).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03514-0 - Catholicism and the Great War: Religion and Everyday  
Life in Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914–1922

Patrick J. Houlihan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 8 Catholicism and the Great War

male stories. Catholic women and children remain a marginalized group of historical actors. The present work represents this group in order to more accurately depict the religious experiences of believers.

The landscape of Central European war history is starting to change. Benjamin Ziemann's *Front und Heimat*, a fundamental work on Bavaria (a heavily Catholic region of the German Empire), brilliantly dismantles Nazi myths of combat solidarity at the front, arguing that ties between homefront and battlefield were much more consequential. Ziemann finds that for soldiers from Bavaria, a heavily agricultural area, regional loyalties of farm, family, and faith were extremely important markers of identity.<sup>26</sup> Bavaria, as a key Catholic region of the German Empire and a vital point of transnational affiliation between Germany and Austria-Hungary, also figures largely in the present study. This book builds on this work by incorporating other regions and firmly keeping in mind the comparative dynamics of the different empires.

On a pan-European level, religion during the First World War remains vastly understudied, particularly in comparison to the Second World War and its aftermath.<sup>27</sup> Catholics were immersed in processes of globalization that took formative shape in the nineteenth century and continue into the twenty-first.<sup>28</sup> Many works of Catholic history rightly point out that the Church's story of adaptation to the modern world took huge strides forward with the Second Vatican Council of 1962–65. Thus, the present book highlights how the Catholic story of the twentieth century, as seen through the losing powers, does not fit with standard narratives of the Great War as an epic moment of disillusioning modernism.

Prescient analyses of wartime Catholicism have called attention to the need to place the experiences of the laity at their center.<sup>29</sup> Especially in historical long-term analyses, structural factors tend to compress the era of the world wars into a rubric of clerical nationalism, in which the power structure of religion–nation–power has remained the definitive experience of religiosity since the French Revolution.<sup>30</sup> The focus on clerical

<sup>26</sup> Benjamin Ziemann, *Front und Heimat: Ländliche Kriegserfahrungen im südlichen Bayern, 1914–1923* (Essen: Klartext, 1997). Recently translated as Benjamin Ziemann, *War Experiences in Rural Germany, 1914–1923*, trans. Alex Skinner (Oxford: Berg, 2007).

<sup>27</sup> Nicholas Atkin and Frank Tallett, *Priests, Prelates, and People: A History of European Catholicism since 1750* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>28</sup> Vincent Viaene, "International History, Religious History, Catholic History: Perspectives for Cross-Fertilization (1830–1914)," *European History Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (2008): 578–607.

<sup>29</sup> Andreas Holzem and Christoph Holzappel, "Kriegserfahrung als Forschungsproblem: Der Erste Weltkrieg in der religiösen Erfahrung von Katholiken," *Theologische Quartalschrift* 182, no. 4 (2002): 279–97.

<sup>30</sup> Andreas Holzem, ed., *Krieg und Christentum: Religiöse Gewalttheorien in der Kriegserfahrung des Westens* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2009).



Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03514-0 - Catholicism and the Great War: Religion and Everyday  
Life in Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914–1922

Patrick J. Houlihan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

nationalism, however, tends to instrumentalize religion in service of state aims: that is, to emphasize that religious enthusiasm was “successful” to the extent that it sustained social cohesion, advancing mobilization for a victorious political outcome in the war.

Instead, this study focuses on the losing powers in a transnational context, showing that even though political entities in Central Europe lost a disastrous war, religious believers there had a wide variety of religious experiences. These religious experiences certainly included the nation, but they were not exclusively, or even primarily, defined by it. Religious believers made sense of the war at many levels: individual, familial, local, national, imperial, and transnational. The nation was only one of many valences of loyalty. Studies of popular religion have rightly insisted that the boundary between institutional religion and superstition is blurred.<sup>31</sup> In the realm of popular religion, forms of Catholic spirituality drew on pagan and folk cultures, adapted by individuals to fit the new circumstances of war.

The Great War was an epic moment in the religious history of modern Europe, and yet the voices of ordinary believers remain marginalized by the sound and fury of the war’s immense cultural legacy. This book analyzes themes on a broad scale across national boundaries, relating huge swaths of Central and Eastern Europe to more pan-European developments. It exemplifies the classical theoretical tension between the “horizon of expectation” (*Erwartungshorizont*) and “realm of experience” (*Erfahrungsraum*) articulated by Reinhart Koselleck.<sup>32</sup> Avoiding simplistic starting and stopping points such as 1914 or 1918, the book’s narrative instead shows how the Great War as experienced by religious believers does not fit standard twentieth-century chronological signposts.

Thus, this book is a study of how a very traditional religion, stereotyped as archaic, confronted and adjusted to the new horrors of industrial warfare. At the level of the nation, collective symbolic loss was an important part of the conflict, but this was only one level at which religious believers conceived of the war. The book examines the bishops’ infamous war theology and its transmission to the masses of believers, but it also represents the lesser-known positions of the papacy and of lay believers. It examines fundamental contrasts between national/imperial visions of collective sacrifice and what these meant for individual believers in terms

<sup>31</sup> Christine Beil, Thomas Fliege, Monique Scheer et al., “Populare Religiosität und Kriegserfahrungen,” *Theologische Quartalschrift* 182, no. 4 (2002): 298–320; Gottfried Korff, ed., *Alliierte im Himmel: Populare Religiosität und Kriegserfahrung* (Tübingen: Tübinger Vereinigung für Volkskunde, 2006).

<sup>32</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1979).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03514-0 - Catholicism and the Great War: Religion and Everyday  
Life in Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914–1922

Patrick J. Houlihan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 10 Catholicism and the Great War

of personal piety, especially after it became apparent that the war was lost. Institutional prescriptions of the Catholic faith formed important orientation points for believers. Whenever possible, however, this work stresses the lived reality of individual experiences of transcendence. It places emphasis on pastoral forms of theology and religious practice, showing the popular reception of ideas, the transmission to action of the faithful, and the autonomous modes of spirituality that developed against Church guidelines. Thus, this work highlights both Church and state authorities' instrumentalization of faith and individual lay believers' assertion of their faith as a form of personal identity and experience.

### Methodology

Impossible to articulate fully for one person, and even more so for millions of believers in two empires, a focus on religion and everyday life will inevitably fall short of an adequate representation of personal religiosity. Nevertheless, one should clarify some of the guiding methods. In studying religious phenomena, where does one draw the line for classifying something as a religious experience? Scholars of religious studies will continue to debate whether the existence of a concept of "religion" makes sense.<sup>33</sup> In order not to get bogged down in endless wrangling over this issue, this book has been generous in classifying according to an ideal-type characteristic of Catholicism defined by both scholars and believers. Nevertheless, in order to better represent cultural flow and personal agency, it also incorporates a model of concentric, overlapping circles of commitment.<sup>34</sup> At the center of the circle lie the doctrine and dogma of the Catholic Church seated in Rome under the authority of the Pope, but the direction of commitment to that center has two-way movement: both centripetal and centrifugal.

This study focuses on Catholicism specifically, although other religions and confessions will be discussed throughout. Occasionally, in order to compare and contrast forms of Christianity, the book discusses Protestant spirituality in particular. There are obvious areas of overlap: for instance, in loyalty to Kaiser Wilhelm II as the highest state authority in Imperial Germany. In some cases, the book has used Protestant archival material, and one may wonder at the scholarly legitimacy of including

<sup>33</sup> For excellent discussion of these issues, see Robert A. Orsi, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>34</sup> John Taylor, "The Future of Christianity," in *The Oxford History of Christianity*, ed. John McManners (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 644–83. See also David B. Barrett, George Thomas Kurian, and Todd M. Johnson, eds., *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World*, 2nd edn., 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).