

## 1 Religion and the State

How did the First World War reflect the spiritual and religious sensibilities of individual citizens and their larger societies? To many observers, the war simply overwhelmed faith in religion. The meat-grinder of the trenches, the escalation of destructive power wielded by armies, the strident dehumanization of the enemy: all combined to erode individual trust in God and religion. In their place, materialist secularism became the defining creed of Western society. Having lost their faith in the divine, Europeans – and to a lesser degree Americans – began to look toward themselves for inspiration. By 1930, memoirists, poets, novelists, and early historians crafted a consensus narrative of the 1914–18 war that hinged upon the dual premises of tragic incompetence and mass insanity. The mass slaughter of the Great War, they argued (from an almost uniquely Western Front perspective, it should be noted), was the result of bungled military planning and cowardly political leadership. It was the signal tragedy that should never have occurred, but which was much needed. Without the war and its tremendous loss of life and capital, the old order would have lingered well into the twentieth century, constraining the advent of modern sensibility and the triumph of secular values over tradition.

Just as with its political and social outcomes, the war's long-term effects on religion and faith are still unfolding. Catholicism underwent a dynamic shift in focus, completing its transition from a politically and socially reactionary outlook to one that became at least equally concerned with social reform. Within Protestant denominations, doctrinal splits that began in wartime still exert their influence. First articulated in 1915, Fundamentalism has not only continued to define a commitment to a literal interpretation of scriptural eschatology, it has also grown to exert tremendous political influence and power in the United States and other countries. Meanwhile the pacifist message embodied within the Society of Friends (Quakers), Mennonite, and other nonconformist denominations has continued to vie with other, more statist-oriented outlooks that embrace military conflict as part of a larger divine plan. Russian Orthodoxy is again

influential and significant in its home country, rivalling and exceeding in some ways its status under the last Tsar.

The war also undermined the influence of the Ottoman Empire. Postwar settlements dissolved the Ottoman Caliphate, dividing many provinces that had been under Islamic rule since the seventh century into mandates and colonies under the control of Western European Christian empires. The fragmented political landscape that even today challenges attempts to craft stability and peace is the direct product of the end of the First World War. Judaism was also greatly affected by the First World War. Zionism acquired greater legitimacy as a viable political and social concept during the war. The 1917 Balfour Declaration signaled tacit British support for the Zionist project, signaling to Jews across the world that a Palestinian homeland was possible. Alternatively, despite their participation and sacrifices, the Jewish community of Europe was unjustly associated with shirkerism, war profiteering, and political betrayals in a new anti-Semitism that portended sinister implications.

The speed with which the churches embraced the war is remarkable, but it should not be a surprise. Over the previous century, as the Great Powers embarked on their own imperial enterprises, churches were encouraged to join the state in promoting a patriotic and nationalistic creed that validated a more strenuous foreign policy. Catholic bishops, priests, and lay ministers, for example, adopted pro-imperialist rhetoric in the late nineteenth century primarily to mark out their congregations' place alongside other groups as loyal supporters of the state. In doing so, they made a choice between the modernist humanism that was changing the face of Roman Catholicism under Pope Leo XIII and the more materialistic demands of the Church as an institution. However important intellectual and moralistic dialogue was to advancing the Catholic creed, the immediate compromises demanded by local society to preserve Church autonomy were paramount. If the state demanded accommodation with imperialist projects, then the Church was obligated to support these lest it surrender its privilege.

The focus of this section is on the interactions between organized religions and the major combatant states. Each of the primary faiths – Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Islam – is given its own section, with a last section dedicated to the Allied colonial

armies. Within each section, the experiences of specific nations are discussed in detail. As the diversity of each major denomination and their subordinate case studies is presented, so too are shared characteristics that reveal how religion was a central factor in expressing national identity before, during, and after the war.

### *The First World War and Catholicism*

The most active organized mass resistance to the war should have occurred within the Roman Catholic Church. The opening of the war was alleged to have sent Pope Pius X to his deathbed on August 20, 1914. His replacement, Benedict XV, spoke out repeatedly against the war, and ultimately declared the Church's neutrality in November 1914. He next offered to negotiate a December 1914 truce, followed by a proposed peace conference. No one took this offer seriously, which weighed heavily on Benedict throughout the war. The pope's objections to the war continued as the conflict wore on. In 1915 he was a staunch opponent to Italian intervention, citing the damage it might cause the church and its reputation. Throughout the war he attempted (unsuccessfully) to limit both sides from adopting religious symbols and themes in the name of the war effort.<sup>1</sup> In August 1917, he again proposed a cease fire, followed by disarmament and reconstruction. By this point, all Western participants were committed to seeing the conflict to the bitter end.

Benedict's calls for peace also went unheeded by many of his own subordinate cardinals and clergy. Nationalist war fervor proved too enticing and inclusive for church leaders in Germany, France, Belgium, Italy, and Austria-Hungary where bishops and cardinals alike rejected his peace appeals. Political expediency played a large part in these decisions. As the war drew on, the Catholic hierarchy in the combatant nations became even more belligerent, rejecting out of hand any attempts from the Vatican to broker peace. In Britain, where Catholicism was a minority faith, prelates reasoned any conduct short of total support would undercut recent political

<sup>1</sup> Adrian Gregory, "Beliefs and Religion," in Jay Winter (editor), *The Cambridge History of the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 418–444, here 429–430.

concessions that legitimized the Church. France, though a majority Catholic nation, was coming off of decades of bitter infighting between secularist Republicans and conservative-leaning anti-Republican Catholics who sought a greater role for the Church in daily affairs. Here the majority of priests sought to prove their patriotism by supporting the war even as it was bleeding their congregations dry. German Catholics were likewise eager to win legitimacy in the eyes of the Wilhelmine court. Since the bruising contest with Prime Minister Otto von Bismarck during the *kulturkampf* of the 1870s, lingering antipathy toward Catholics in official and informal German society remained a pressing concern.<sup>2</sup>

There were signs, however, of greater support for Benedict XV's appeal to peace among the Catholic laity. Most noteworthy was the acclaimed miracle at the Portuguese village Fátima in May 1917. Since Portugal had joined the Allies in 1916, tensions in the rural countryside grew as the first units were sent to the Western Front. Like other Catholic majority nations, Portugal struggled even before the war with a see-saw fight for influence between urban liberals and rural conservatives – the latter enlisting the Church to win the support of pious peasants. After a group of children reported a visitation from the Archangel Michael and Virgin Mary in a grotto near Fátima, thousands of Portuguese adults seized on the event as a signal of imminent divine intervention. News of the supernatural visitations spread rapidly through the Catholic world and was interpreted in varied ways. Most observers were quick to dismiss the entire affair as the product of rural teenagers' overactive imaginations. The faithful, however, took the reports more seriously, particularly after the October 13, 1917 mass gathering in anticipation of a sixth visitation. Thousands of onlookers – skeptics and believers – saw the sun behave erratically in the sky above the site, giving weight to the arguments of those who put stock in the prophecies. Was the intervention described during the visions an end to the war, or did it represent something more total and complete? In addition to the eschatological implications of the message, some would argue the prophecies anticipated the imminent Bolshevik revolution in Russia.

<sup>2</sup> Ashley Beck, *Benedict XV and World War I* (Catholic Truth Society, 2007), 24–25, 37–38.

In the end, most Catholics across Europe and America supported the war. From the onset, a spiritual dialogue engaged Catholics in uniform as to the inner morality of war and its effect on the faithful. Soldiers experienced many forms of conversion and epiphany in the trenches, making combat a moral test as well as an opportunity to proselytize on behalf of the Church.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the war transformed victims of the bloodshed, both soldiers and civilians, into martyrs for their faith. More than simply proof against the aggression of the enemy, their deaths demonstrated the power of the individual will to make a lonely stand against the secularism and materialism of the age. Another aspect of the interaction between the Catholic faithful and the war is its dual message of punishment and hope. Modernity had multiplied man's sins, to the point where the war was brought about – not by human agency, but by spiritual intervention – as a form of retribution. This divine sanction was not offered in isolation, however. The grief brought with it the opportunity for reconciliation with God: “In their spiritual dereliction, the combatants and their families turned to the intercession of those who could bring them temporal comfort in the face of war; the urgent needs of this calamitous time led directly to the core Christian message of sacrifice and resurrection.”<sup>4</sup>

### *France*

The war provoked a series of crises within churches in all countries, most notably in France. The Third Republic was avowedly secular, if not anticlerical. Its leaders sought to contain the influence of what had at times been a decidedly reactionary conservative Catholic Church through legislation and social sanction since the 1880s. Some of the charges and actions smack today of conspiracy theory, including claims that because Catholics acknowledged the Papacy as the spiritual head of their faith, they were as a whole untrustworthy and anti-French. Other claims, however, were calculated in response to the perceived threat to the secular state the

<sup>3</sup> Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14–18: Understanding the Great War* (Hill and Wang, 2000, 2002), 127.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

Church historically presented. Since the French Revolution, Church and state were consistently at odds in France. Catholicism's stance against the First Republic, its record as a counterrevolutionary force that stood alongside the monarchy, and its perceived influence over landless peasants and impoverished workers amidst the rising power of Socialist unions and political parties gave weight to these charges. France and the Vatican ended all diplomatic relations in July 1904, opening new tensions between the Republic and the Church. As France entered the First World War, the government's relationship with the Catholic Church was at best frosty, if not openly hostile.<sup>5</sup>

Within the military's hierarchy, Catholics found a home. The three pillars of French conservatism were traditionally monarchists, the Church, and the military. After 1871, leftists increasingly questioned the army's loyalty to the Republic. The possibility of a new Bonaparte-style figure was never far from civilian politicians' minds. The political machinations of the erstwhile Minister of War General Georges Boulanger in the late 1880s, and accusations that he was conspiring with monarchists to install himself as a new dictator, fed this distrust. The anti-Semitic Dreyfus Affair likewise brought attention to intersections between the Catholic Right and like-minded army officers. After Captain Dreyfus's 1899 pardon, Republicans sought to bring the army to heel by breaking up what was seen as a dangerous Catholic anti-Republican clique in the officer corps. A staunch Republican supporter, General Louis André, was appointed Minister of War. He immediately purged the army's openly Catholic officers, forcing those who remained to demonstrate their loyalty by participating in the census of church property following the December 9, 1905 law ordering the separation of church and state. For their part, army officers were caught in a terrible bind, since Pope Pius X ordered all French Catholics to resist the policy.<sup>6</sup> By 1914, the anti-Catholic policies within the

<sup>5</sup> James F. McMillan, "French Catholics: *Rumeurs Infâmes* and the *Union Sacrée*, 1914–1918," in Frans Coetzee and Marilyn Shevin-Coetzee, *Authority, Identity and the Social History of the Great War* (Berghahn Books, 1995), 113–132, here 114.

<sup>6</sup> Leonard V. Smith, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, Annette Becker, *France and the Great War, 1914–1918* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 18.

army had effectively stunted the institution's professional growth. Promising young officers were denied promotion or appointment purely on the basis of their professed faith. A culture of informants permeated the army, with the war ministry spying on their own officers, and encouraging others to report on their peers suspected of being secret Catholics.<sup>7</sup>

For France, the war quickly became an existential crisis. With nearly one-quarter of French soil under enemy control, including some of its most productive industrial areas, as well as very fertile farmland, it was imperative that all available resources were marshalled to win the war. In this vein, the Poincaré Government oversaw a delicate truce with the French Catholic hierarchy. For the sake of the Republic, a rapprochement between the two powers was undertaken to rally the church behind the state in a *Union sacrée* to resist the German enemy to the last. Nevertheless, anticlerical politicians and editors remained skeptical of the Church's commitment to the cause. Pope Benedict XV's peace platform was greeted with open derision by the majority of French citizens, including devout Catholics. France had been violated by a rapacious and greedy neighbor for the second time in half a century, critics argued. This reasoning certainly prompted the rejection of Benedict's peace encyclical by the majority of French Catholic bishops.<sup>8</sup> High-ranking French clergymen took to the ecumenical pulpit and the secular stage to reject the Pope's peace initiatives, claiming the threat was too great and that Benedict, despite his best intentions, was misinformed. Anticlericals took this a step further, reading into the Pope's diplomacy an anti-French agenda. Active skeptics argued the pope's peace plans revealed his anti-French/pro-German bias. Benedict XV's peace plans were reimagined as evidence of a larger Catholic plot to exploit the war to facilitate a religious revival among the frightened masses, secretly accumulate power through the management of wartime charities, and ultimately overthrow the secular regime and replace it with a new government that was loyal to the directives of Rome. Such scurrilous rumors were hard to tamp down, and despite censorship efforts, continued to appear in leftist-leaning papers and

<sup>7</sup> Jack Snyder, *The Ideology of the Offensive: Military Decision Making and the Disasters of 1914* (Cornell University Press, 1984), 52, 73–74.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 119–120.

journals until the end of the war. The charges were imaginary, but the circumstances of the Catholic Church's transnational political identity structure only fueled the rumors.<sup>9</sup>

The collective weight of the anticlerical rumors was significant, but ultimately they failed to diminish the wartime relationship between the Church and the Republic. In addition to the 1,500 commissioned military chaplains who served directly in the army, over 31,000 priests, monks, and seminary students entered service as soldiers and officers of the line or in the medical services. Priests regularly delivered sermons calling on congregants to give whatever they could spare to help pay for the war. Catholic hospitals took the lead in caring for wounded soldiers.<sup>10</sup> Such efforts were reciprocated by the Republic. Historical examples of French martial Catholicism were introduced to promote the war effort. Before the war a politically divisive symbol associated exclusively with Catholicism and the political right, Jeanne d'Arc received a makeover as an explicit depiction of French victimhood at the hand of foreign (now German) invaders and the people's patriotic stand on her behalf. Appearing in her peasant dress, she became a study in martyrdom (despite the Church's own role in her execution), a symbol of the desperate French refugee compelled to flee the despoliation of their home. Alternatively portrayed in the panoply of knighthood, Jeanne d'Arc was the martial sister-in-imagination of Marianne, an avenging icon of the French people seeking retribution against a perfidious and rapacious enemy. As Hew Strachan notes, "Both images carried patriotic overtones, even if [the first] was of a revolutionary France rather than a royalist one. The outbreak of the war, and particularly the bombardment of Reims cathedral, where Charles VII had been crowned under a standard held aloft by Joan, permitted these divergent interpretations to be integrated."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> McMillan, "French Catholics," 121–127.

<sup>10</sup> Annette Becker, *War and Faith: The Religious Imagination in France, 1914–1930* (Berg, 1998), 32–34.

<sup>11</sup> Hew Strachan, *The First World War, Volume I: To Arms* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 1118.



On the whole, the Catholic Church benefited from its support of the war. The French hierarchy wanted to restore the Church's place in the Republic, and to end its long status as a pariah in politics and society. There was more at stake, however, than recovering lost reputation. Theologian A. J. Hoover describes a social construct he labels as "Christian nationalism." Accordingly, the state exists not only as an ethnic or political entity based on self-determination, but also as a reflection of the people's relationship with God's plan. He writes, "If a nation is a divine creation, it follows logically that the collective mind or soul of a related ethnic group could be called a *Volksgeist*, a national spirit or soul. This spirit is something divine and essentially moral."<sup>12</sup> By demonstrating their own selfless commitment to the Republic, French Catholics were acknowledging their subordinate status in the relationship between church and state. The question of whether or not to accept the primacy of the secular state was moot. The Church was showing its own unwavering support for the concept of France as a Christian nation, and in the process cementing its place as an essential institution in the living, vital Republic.

### *Italy*

After the *Risorgimento*, anticlerical sentiment dominated liberal intellectual and commerce-minded elites, particularly those from northern Italy. Lingering resentments toward the Vatican's long resistance to unification were realized in a series of public recriminations and displays that continued throughout the war. Similarly trade unionists, many of them socialists in fact or by association, looked at the Church as an oppressive institution, just one of a set of property holders that exerted their power over the workers. Conversely, rural Italian peasants remained devout and loyal to the Church, accepting its moral and social direction with little complaint. Caught between disdain and deference, Italy joined the war as a nation and community divided.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> A. J. Hoover, *God, Germany, and Britain in the Great War* (Praeger Publishers, 1989), 86.

<sup>13</sup> R. J. B. Bosworth, *Mussolini's Italy: Life Under the Fascist Dictatorship, 1915–1945* (Penguin Books, 2005), 15, 31, 54.

Despite the concerns expressed by Pope Benedict XV, the Italian Catholic Church openly supported the war. Seizing upon the opportunity to speak to the nation at large, the Church hierarchy used the war as a metaphor for the challenges it faced as an institution in the post-*Risorgimento* age. The war was both a divine punishment and a chance for personal and communal redemption. Great suffering would follow, but by the time Italy joined the war, there was little question about what was to be expected. But the immediate pain and loss in combat would reaffirm Italian virtue, introducing a new society that would embrace the Church and its moral direction.<sup>14</sup>

Just as in France, Catholic clergymen and bishops also perceived the war as an opportunity for repairing the rifts between Church and society unleashed a generation before. Barred since 1865 from providing chaplains to the army, in June 1915 the Vatican appointed a bishop to the Front after the army's commander, Marshal Luigi Cadorna, proposed assigning one to each regiment. Ultimately 24,000 priests would accompany the army to the Isonzo. Military service instilled a new martial inspiration for some of the chaplains, nationalizing their outlook and paving the way for their own political conversion experience as Fascism evolved after the war. Convinced that the path to salvation resided in the hearts of men willing to embrace death for the greater good, these martial clerics transferred their disdain to pacifists, anarchists, and socialists.<sup>15</sup>

A more immediate dilemma, shared across ranks in the wartime Italian army, related to combat itself. Historian Vanda Wilcox describes how conscripts confronted near-existential anxiety over the prospect of killing white Catholic Europeans. She cites the perspective of one soldier in particular:

What is the function of a soldier? To kill... Killing is a crime: up until yesterday that's what they taught us at school, in church, in our families... The penal code is pitiless with murderers ... but now instead they teach me ... that as soon as another man who they call my

<sup>14</sup> John Gooch, *The Italian Army and the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 163–164.

<sup>15</sup> Bosworth, *Mussolini's Italy*, 88–89.