



## THE GOD OF WAR SOME ASPECTS OF ATHEISM AND RELIGION IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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### RESEARCH ARTICLE



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#### DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.260403030>

#### Abstract

This article intends to examine whether there was spurt of atheistic trends during and in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. That is to say whether the First World War served as breaking point in History when it came to matters of religion and personal beliefs. In that while it stresses on the effects of the event itself, it also considers the social forces that existed beforehand and had been carrying on over the preceding century. In as much as the dissolution centered around the war could inculcate disbelief in god, it is also recognized that rationalist academic pursuits of the last generation before the war enabled the society to look at organized religion more critically. Writings of contemporary scholars of note such as Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Auguste Comte and Bertrand Russell would point to that. The secularization of the European universities surely had helped. We look into the declarations of atheism in military formations of the then times. The middle class's affinity to atheism has been amply portrayed in art and literature. The Godlessness is evident an understanding of the manifestation of evil during the war as much as it is in Benito Mussolini's call for widespread secularization of church property right after the war. Yet the cultural mobilization around the war created the concept of a holy and just war. The clergy too got involved; apart from working as chaplain they hurled insults about nationalities among themselves. It has to be remembered that the Catholic Church was a transnational organization. The roles of different countries when it came to religion is also discussed; the Ottoman call for Jihad or the Austrian relative toleration have to be considered.

**Keywords:** *Atheism, War, Modernity, Trends of thought in Europe*

#### Introduction

It is often thought that Europe became a continent of atheists and agnostics after World War I, and that the spiritual fabric of Europeans was as ramshackled as the fields of France. While this may not be a completely false statement it certainly lacks the ring of absolute truth. The spread of unbelief in Europe was not spontaneous but had the history of a long build-up to it. But what coincided with the war was perhaps the open resistance to traditional religion. This perhaps had its own reasons. The First World War was Christian in origins and most belligerent nations were driven by a Christian urge of fighting a "just war". In the grand narrative of secularization, the Great War was a moment of hypermodernity, accentuating the disenchantment of the modern world that had begun in the Early Modern Era and the Age of Enlightenment: anything beyond rational materialism was simply a legacy of medieval superstition, out of place with large-scale social trends.

But the generation that preceded the war was perhaps the most instrumental in forging doubt. It was as is known the generation that embraced ideas of Darwin, Marx and Positivism. Nietzsche would emphatically proclaim in 1882 that "God is dead." The enlightenment critique of revealed religion together with the secularization of the universities had augmented the secularization of the society. The scientific world view filled the so-called gaps of knowledge where God resided; and this, according to philosopher John Searle<sup>1</sup> was the only world view that we have. However, very few scholars actually read intellectually serious philosophy of religion. Denials of the possibility or occurrence of the supernatural do not depend on science itself but on naturalist assumptions that comes from univocal metaphysics that have its roots on metaphysical nominalism. While this entails a metaphysical self-limitation of science we would not delve deeper into the dynamics of atheism more than where there is congruence with events of the First World War. In such a diverse experience as this war with so many underlying ideological tussles the question of religion too was more conflicting than we would imagine.

The harrowing experience along with the modernist trend of thinking brought about a surge of disbelief during and after the war. It was only natural in such a watershed moment of modernism as this war was. While the carnage made the soldiers lose their faith,

the loss of near ones and social suffering had the same effect in the home front. British writer Charles Edward Montague writes in his aptly named memoir *Disenchantment*, that religious leaders were prime examples of corrupt authority and hierarchy: “in the first few weeks of the war, most of the flock had too simply taken on trust all that its pastors and masters had said.” Later it would only become amply clear to them that these were frauds. As the war dragged on leading to its gradual de-glorification and people saw how they had been alienated by providence to hunger, poverty and illness they were free to doubt its existence. Atheism was rarely officially acknowledged in official statistics and must be considered as part of the spectrum of more widespread public agnosticism. A survey of the British 38th Division’s nearly 15,000 troops identified only three self-proclaimed atheists. Similarly, among the U.S. 82nd Division, only twenty-four out of 32,468 soldiers<sup>2</sup> identified themselves as atheist. Personal narratives of individual’s religious attitudes were highly variable and should be contextualized in terms of their recoverable inner thought-worlds.

Atheistic attitudes, dominant in modernist portrayals of art and literature were popular among the literate middle and upper classes. We see countless mention to irreligiousness in Hemingway. A priest is an object of lampooning for his being a man of God. There is a strong belief in the camp that the pope wants Austria to win the war because of his financial dependence to Emperor Franz Joseph. There also the mention of a certain book called “Black pig” which the priest considers vile and is probably supposed to be anti-church. “All thinking men are atheists,” someone remarks. This is in anticipation to later developments in Italy when atheist and strident opponent of the church, Benito Mussolini had hoped to secularize church property in the first fascist program of 1919. Graves contends, hardly one soldier in a hundred was inspired by religious feeling of the crudest kind. A sergeant tells him how the Indians do a fine job at not holding with religion in time of war. Bertrand Russell, in a famous lecture in on March 6, 1927 titled “Why Am I Not a Christian” had emphatically taken up the cause of atheism. He criticizes the dogmatic postulation of the Catholic Church that the existence of God can be proven by unaided reason. He also shuns the First Cause doctrine as poverty of our imagination.<sup>3</sup> He also doubts the historical genuineness of Christ which of course is a less important factor. But his bashing of the Christian belief in hell as inhumane is noteworthy. He shows religions to be only of emotional value which is used to make men appear virtuous; something that could be counted essential in a time of war when virtues are largely compromised. But he urges that religions have impeded every step of moral progress, be it the diminution of war or the better treatment of coloured peoples. Russell claimed that the only dissenters of war came from the socialists.

The English artist Paul Nash described his impressions of the trench setting: “No pen or drawing can convey this country – the normal setting of the battles taking place day and night, month after month. Evil and the incarnate fiend alone can be master of this war, and no glimmer of God’s hand is seen anywhere... It is unspeakable, godless, hopeless.” This actually brings us to the other end of the argument. The Godlessness in ruthlessness is equated here with the evil. This allows a religious justification of war where it is fought to eliminate the evil. An eschatological view was shaped that the conflict would ensure future peace to triumph over forces of evil and redeem humanity. God at once made his presence felt when combatant states used religion to muster support in what became a total war involving much participation from the masses. Even social groups declared hostile had in the “spirit of 1914” attached a quasi-metaphysical meaning to what they thought would be the “just war”. At the other end was the myth of modernist unity among populations that transcended social divisions of class, religion and other things. But as the founders of religious sociology such as Weber or Halbach say<sup>4</sup>, if modernity really contradicted the idea of religion, then a modern war would be much removed from religion. But this was hardly the case as consent to the fight combined the cases of God and fatherland. The German expressionist poet Alfred Lichtenstein urges, “God protect me from misfortune... May I never die in squalor for our well-loved fatherland?” Apart from the noticeable fright of war what is distinct here is the placing of Theism and Patriotism as complementary concepts.

Hertz distinguishes this “religion of war” from the usual religion as a sacrament based on a sense of sacrifice and constant possibility of death. He despises this as a religion of the terrified. Fundamental values from the fatherland to family, religion and regions were believed to being defended in the WWI. Even the socialists though usually pacifist gave support to fight for their cause of socialism. This was a process of total cultural mobilization and religion became a part of it. This brings us to what extent was the church and the state aligned to each other. Sacred Unions like the Union Sarcee in France were forged. Anti-religious men like HG Wells too gave into the tide dubbing this to be a holy war where a warrior-saint cult was to emerge. Everyone was made to believe in the absolute truth of the cause. Symbols such as flags and songs were worshipped. In the interwar period, official religion easily blended into political religion. During the war, this resulted in a hateful theology of sanctimoniousness. The Bishop of London gave a call for crusade in 1915. The French churchmen argued that Prussian-German militarism was the continuous outgrowth of the same Teutonic barbarism that had destroyed the Roman Empire. The Catholic Church though is a seemingly transnational organization saw its clergy trading base insults about national stereotypes<sup>5</sup>. Even then the Catholics were in some countries mistrusted just as the Jews and other groups and often accused of slackening in war effort. But it is true, that the French Jews found in the war a way to fight for the revolution that gave them their rights while the German Jew used it for their national integration. It may be worthwhile here to say that, historiographically speaking, much of the literature on popular religion concentrates on Christianity, though there are indications that this is changing popular religion during the war is a model of concentric circles, with the official organized religion as the center of it. Interestingly the only official proclamation of just war came from the Ottoman sultan, Mehmet V in his call for *jihad*.

At the heart of this religious mobilization were military chaplains. In UK, the Army Chaplains department showed increasing involvement of chaplaincy. In France where the official segregation of the Church and state in 1905 meant that the clergy had to enlist, there were chaplains of various orders. The Austro-Hungarian Empire, arguably the most tolerant of all multi ethnic

empires, represented religious-military bureaucracy in its most complex form, managing military chaplains of Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Christianity as well as Jewish and Muslim chaplains. Even then the modernist graves would say, “for Anglican regimental chaplains we had little respect”.<sup>6</sup> He says the chaplains had “one-tenth” of the courage and endurance that military doctors possessed. In a similar manner Jaroslav Hasek’s Svejik portrays these chaplains as unscrupulous drunkards.

But it would be unfair not to note the pacific attitudes of some clergymen. Pope Benedict XV was always against the war and offered to mediate for the restoration of peace. This only earned him the wrath of belligerent nations and he was kept out of the peace negotiations later on. Apart from these, churches and clergymen were involved in relief work and the work of a lot of religious non-combatants mostly women are notable here. But even then, a vision of apocalypse remained. The war was seen as a final judgement from which a sort of deliverance was to be obtained. This was a war to end all wars. No wonder the German general Falkenhayn called the Battle of Verdun *Gestricht*, meaning judgement. A sort of millenarianism developed especially in Germany after the defeat where the war was seen as a conspiracy against Germanic peoples and from this developed the Nazi nationalistic-militaristic cult. Of course, the religious way of equating evil war with the evil enemy was in part to be blamed for this.

However, as the war stagnated the flood of public religious observance trickled down. This was immensely true of Russia where greater levels of altar-state nexus created euphoric anti-war sentiments. But even the understood modernist bastions, the cities across Europe still showed rising levels of Church marriages, attendance to Sunday schools and baptism interestingly more among the working class. This parallel religious war is effectively captured by Graves when he says every English military man thought of the Germans to be generally more pious, a patriotically motivated unified whole, when they were just as horizontally and vertically stratified as the English society. He explains that God and *Gott* had become fighting tribal deities.

**Acknowledgment:** No

**Author’s Contribution:** Moulindra Sundar Dirghangi: Data Collection, Literature Review, Analysis, Methodology, Drafting, Referencing

**Funding:** No

**Declaration:** The author has given consent for the publication.

**Competing Interest:** No

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