



Gott Mit Uns

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It is difficult not to be cynical about the role of religion in the First World War. At a time when Western Christianity perceived itself as a force within European countries and preached the peaceful tenets of that faith there was no rush by the vast majority of the established religions to prevent or condemn the conflict ' far from it.

In 1914, at least 30 million (or near 90% of the total population) professed a Christian religion in the British Isles. Yet church leaders fully endorsed the government's declaration of war against a fellow Christian country.



There were 117 chaplains in the pre-war army. By 1918 there were 1,985 Church of England chaplains, 649 Roman Catholic and about another thousand from the smaller Wesleyan, Baptist, Methodist, Congregationalist, Presbyterian and Salvation Army Protestant denominations, plus sixteen from the Jewish faith. The religious believed that the conflict would revitalise a spirituality evidently lacking in the majority who, it was felt, gave worship only lip service. This 'crusade' against the evils of German militarism would be endorsed by God: as the convinced cleric Bishop of London Arthur Winnington-Ingram (left) put it, 'a great crusade ' we cannot deny it ' to kill Germans. To kill them, not for the sake of killing but to save the world '?

Imperial Germany had come via war and political intrigue to creation in 1871 after a successful Prussian conflict with France. Like all other countries involved in the conflict, they believed that God was on their side,

hence 'Gott Mit Uns' (?God is with us?) stamped on the belt buckle of every Prussian (but not German) infantryman. Prussia was the biggest state of this Empire and had a majority of people who were rather militant Protestants; consequently it had an uneasy religious relationship with the Catholic Church and therefore with its next biggest partner, Bavaria. Here, although its citizens gave political allegiance to the Empire, about 70% gave their religious support to the Pope, and consequently felt that they were discriminated against by their dominant neighbour.



Conflict, it was anticipated, would eliminate such perceived divisions and provide both a political and religious unity, with the Kaiser declaring after the start of hostilities that "Ich kenne keine Parteien mehr, ich kenne nur noch Deutsche!" ("I know no more parties, I know only Germans!"). Patriotic fervor ran high with the popular slogan 'Gott strafe England' and its extension, the poem 'Hymn of Hate?', both created by the German Jew Ernst Lissauer. Lissauer was as emotional and as aggressive as the Bishop of London had been in supporting his country's efforts to win. We see here that, for some, strife was a chance to show loyalty to the state and brought sought-for endorsements to minorities.

Its ally Austria-Hungary was a fractious empire divided, however, more along ethnic rather than religious disunity and its history over many hundreds of years had given it experience that forced it to take notice of minority political and religious rights ' as long as this did not threaten the unity of the state. A more rural entity, generally the beliefs of its soldiers were more unquestioning than those of more industrialised societies and its attempts at a homogeneous state is reflected by its armed forces who contained chaplains of the majority Roman Catholic faith and also those of the Greek Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Protestant Lutherans and Calvinists denominations plus Muslim clerics and, in time of war, Jewish rabbis. Interestingly, as with the other belligerents, these men echoed the patriotic ethos of their nation, as remembered by Lt General Sandor Pavai: 'the good old army chaplains were always there to strengthen soldiers' spirit, before and during the fight, in the

trenches, in the attacks '?

These are just three examples of the conundrum of how hundreds of convinced men, imbued with a high moral sense to God, their religion and of service to their fellow man, served within their armed forces. Many displayed understandable human weakness if not fear and hypocrisy, were reported to have disappeared, so it seemed, when battle commenced; however, some were extremely brave: three Victoria Crosses and numerous other awards for valour were given by the British alone.

On all sides pastors, chaplains and padres, monks, imams and rabbis helped the wounded, rescued the injured and even, it is recorded, occasionally joined in the fight. On reflection, they seem within their own small sphere, to represent the majority, caught unawares and trying to make sense of this Great War.

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