

# CIVILIANS, SOLDIERS AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE AFTERLIFE IN BRITAIN DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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FOR most educated Britons the First World War is synonymous with death on a massive scale. Although reliable estimates remained elusive for many years (this deceptively straightforward process being complicated by issues such as determining the nationality of the fallen and when to stop counting deaths as war-related), the figures are sobering enough: according to research published in the 1980s, as many as 772,000 Britons died in military service during the First World War.<sup>1</sup> Despite the problems of the statistician, the fact of mass mortality was acutely and painfully obvious to contemporaries, so much so that, in an important essay published in 1981, David Cannadine characterized inter-war Britain as a society that was 'obsessed with death'.<sup>2</sup> Since 1918, the identification of death with the experience of the First World War has lodged itself deep in the national psyche, spawning the myth of 'the lost generation' and dominating the perceptions of posterity. As Dan Todman recently observed:

The terrible cost of the war underpins many of our other received beliefs about it: the incompetence of the generals whose actions resulted in so many lost lives; the purposelessness of any war with such a butcher's bill; and the miraculous veneration of any veteran who managed to survive the carnage.<sup>3</sup>

However, this perception of an all-engulfing tide of death requires further analysis and considerable qualification. Such is the strength of the mythology itself that it seems almost callous to point out that a third of British males of military age never served in the armed forces and that, despite vast numbers of wounded,<sup>4</sup> nearly ninety per cent of

<sup>1</sup> D. Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory* (London, 2005), 44.

<sup>2</sup> D. Cannadine, 'War and Death, Grief and Mourning in Modern Britain', in J. Whaley, ed., *Mirrors of Mortality: Studies in the Social History of Death* (London, 1981), 187–242, at 189, 230.

<sup>3</sup> Todman, *Great War*, 44.

<sup>4</sup> As many as 2,270,000, although many soldiers were wounded more than once; A. Rawson, ed., *The British Army Handbook 1914–1918* (Stroud, 2006), 349.

the men who served in the British army (which sustained the overwhelming majority of British casualties) actually *survived* the war.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, far from being a society in which the loss of an immediate family member was universal, this was true of an average of one in six British families. However, these bereavements were not evenly borne across the country or between social classes. Scotland (and most notably the Highlands) was particularly badly affected, along with some smaller English towns (such as Barnsley and Accrington) which raised their own 'Pals' battalions for Lord Kitchener's volunteer army.<sup>6</sup> Nor can the common assumption that the war was 'a betrayal of the ruled by the rulers' be sustained from the social incidence of mortality: the aristocracy suffered more than any other social class; the church press testified to the enormous extent of clerical bereavement; and the impact upon the upper and middle classes as a whole can be inferred from the fact that a disproportionate number of Britain's war dead were officers.<sup>7</sup> Finally, nowhere is the mendacity of this 'morbid revelling in mass fatality'<sup>8</sup> (as Todman describes it) more obvious than in its sheer Anglocentricity; far from being uniquely afflicted by the First World War, in both relative and absolute terms Britain suffered much less than either France, Germany or Austria-Hungary. Furthermore, it was a reflection of the savagery of the war on the forgotten Eastern Front that, whereas sixteen out of every thousand Britons perished, Serbia lost as many as fifty-seven per thousand of its population.<sup>9</sup>

The subject of British religion and the mass mortality of 1914–18 is not virgin territory for historians; nevertheless, it has been locked into this popular and misleading paradigm. For example, in his landmark study *The Church of England and the First World War* (1978), Alan Wilkinson stressed the scale of Britain's losses by citing the casualties suffered by the British army on 1 July 1916, which he insisted were 'the heaviest losses ever suffered in a single day by any army in the first

<sup>5</sup> M. Middlebrook, *Your Country Needs You* (Barnsley, 2000), 134; Todman, *Great War*, 44–45; J. M. Winter, *The Experience of World War I* (London, 2006), 207.

<sup>6</sup> Todman, *Great War*, 46; J. L. MacLeod, "'Greater Love Hath No Man Than This': Scotland's Conflicting Religious Responses to Death in the Great War', *ScHR* 81 (2002), 70–96, at 70.

<sup>7</sup> B. Bond, *The Unquiet Western Front: Britain's Role in Literature and History* (Cambridge, 2002), 65; Todman, *Great War*, 46; S. Lee, *Rural Society and the Anglican Clergy, 1815–1914* (Woodbridge, 2006), 190–91; War Office, *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire During the Great War* (London, 1922; repr. London, 1992), 29, 237.

<sup>8</sup> Todman, *Great War*, 67.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 45.

war'.<sup>10</sup> This is not true; the French army alone went through a much more sanguinary experience on at least one, and probably two, occasions in 1914 and 1917.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Wilkinson delivered a largely negative verdict as to the Church's ability to meet the needs of the bereaved. While it could offer the consolation of the familiar, most notably in the Prayer Book's 'Order for the Burial of the Dead', it was largely unable to accommodate popular religious sentiment and aspiration: '[T]he Church of England was nervous of folk religion: its Evangelicalism was too puritan, biblicist and pietistic, its liberalism too detached and academic, its catholicism too self-conscious, dogmatic and nostalgic.'<sup>12</sup> Other historians have happily concurred with this verdict. In his highly influential essay on 'War and Death, Grief and Mourning in Modern Britain', David Cannadine pronounced that 'the established Church – concerned, like all Christianity, with explaining the significance of death in this world and life in the next – seemed unable to cope when confronted with so much mortality and grief'. Moreover, and on the basis of very little new evidence, he broadened this criticism by extending it to 'traditional religion' in general which, he averred, 'seemed inadequate in the face of so much death and bereavement'.<sup>13</sup>

In this seminal essay, Cannadine identified two subjects as worthy of note in relation to religion, death and the afterlife in the First World War, namely the rise of the cult of remembrance and the surging popularity of spiritualism; these, he maintained, had two things in common: 'they were in large part generated by the bereaved for their own comfort'.<sup>14</sup> Historical research has tended to pursue this agenda ever since, with little thought being spared by historians of spiritualism in particular for the abiding influence of institutional religion, much of which is simply subsumed in an expansive and rather misleading definition of spiritualism itself. However, this preoccupation with the issues of spiritualism and remembrance masks a more complex reality. Even before the war, the relationship between spiritualism and more orthodox Christianity was far more ambivalent and varied than is often

<sup>10</sup> A. Wilkinson, *The Church of England and the First World War* (London, 1978), 169.

<sup>11</sup> H. Strachan, *The First World War*, Volume I: *To Arms* (Oxford, 2001), 230; A. Clayton, *Paths of Glory: the French Army 1914–18* (London, 2005), 140.

<sup>12</sup> Wilkinson, *Church of England*, 196.

<sup>13</sup> Cannadine, 'War and Death', 218–19.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 219.

imagined.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, during the war, and again largely as a result of developments spanning several decades, the principal British Churches showed that they were able to adjust, both devotionally and theologically, to the needs of the time and to provide comfort and meaning for the bereaved. If insufficient attention has been paid to the evidence of wartime eschatology, sermons, worship and pastoralia, our existing understanding of contemporary British society, death and the afterlife is also marred by its largely civilian focus. Although they were the subjects of an enormous weight of concern and speculation, the perspectives and experience of the men who served in the British army during the First World War have been tacitly ignored, except to provide colourful vignettes for advocates and historians of spiritualism.<sup>16</sup> However, at no time in its history has the British army been so large (5.7 million men served in its ranks during the First World War)<sup>17</sup> and never had it been so educated as in 1914–18, a distinction that was largely a function of its unprecedented social diversity. This paper aims to shed some new light on the artificially circumscribed subject of British society and the afterlife in the First World War by quarrying a new seam of evidence relating to contemporary perceptions of the hereafter in the British army. In doing so, it will eschew sensational stories of ghosts and phantasms (so beloved of civilians at home and of cultural historians ever since) in order to focus attention on prevailing discourses on the afterlife that reveal much about the convergence of academic and popular eschatology, the emergence of new or distinctive liturgical and sacramental practices, and the underlying links between religious belief and military morale.

Before proceeding, however, it is necessary to give a broad outline of the impact of the First World War on the relevant theology and practices of Britain's main Churches. By the turn of the twentieth century, the cumulative effect of theological, intellectual and moral developments over the previous half-century meant that hell (along with many other old orthodoxies) was in rapid retreat across a broad front. While Bishop of Birmingham, Charles Gore observed that:

<sup>15</sup> See, in this volume, Georgina Byrne, '“Angels Seen Today”: The Theology of Modern Spiritualism and its Impact on Church of England Clergy, 1852–1939', 360–70.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, A. Conan Doyle, *The History of Spiritualism*, 2 vols (London, 1926), 1: 224–45.

<sup>17</sup> P. Simkins, 'The Four Armies 1914–1918', in D. Chandler and I. Beckett, eds, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the British Army* (Oxford, 1994), 235–57, at 241.

Some thirty years ago there was a sort of Protestant religion, with a doctrine of the Trinity, Heaven and Hell, of Atonement and Judgment, of Resurrection and Eternal Life, which for good or evil could be more or less assumed. Such a standard has gone. I seriously doubt whether nearly half the men of the country could seriously say that they believed that Christ is God or that he actually rose from the dead on the third day ... their religious opinions are in complete chaos.<sup>18</sup>

The mass bereavement that occurred under the impact of war merely put the seal on the fate of hell. In 1917, C. W. Emmet, a New Testament scholar and the Vicar of West Hendred in Berkshire, claimed that 'It is probably safe to say that except in a few restricted circles a living belief in hell has practically vanished to-day in the Church of England'.<sup>19</sup> The state of opinion in the Free Churches was more varied. However, in 1907 the Congregationalist R. J. Campbell, then the standard-bearer of English liberal theology, denounced a raft of 'dogmatic beliefs' including hell as 'not only misleading but unethical'.<sup>20</sup> This liberalization of thought, it must be emphasized, was by no means confined to English Christianity. By the turn of the twentieth century, mainstream Scottish Presbyterianism had freed itself from a narrowly Calvinistic interpretation of the Westminster Confession, and, for the ministers of the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church, 'theological precision' had duly 'given way to a licensed (if still cautious) breadth of interpretation and a less rigorous degree of uniformity'.<sup>21</sup> By 1914, it appeared that 'the modern Scottish sermon' was distinguished by its 'practical teaching' centred 'round the Person of Christ'; those 'doctrines which may be subsidiary or doubtful [were], for the most part, quietly ignored'.<sup>22</sup> However, the old eschatology was by no means entirely vanquished. To conservative Evangelicals (a tendency that was represented across the principal Protestant Churches and which

<sup>18</sup> H. G. Wood, 'The Middle Classes', in W. K. Lowther Clarke, ed., *Facing the Facts: Or, an Englishman's Religion* (London, 1911), 55–87, at 70–71.

<sup>19</sup> C. W. Emmet, 'The Bible and Hell', in B. H. Streeter, ed., *Immortality: An Essay in Discovery, Co-ordinating Scientific, Psychological and Biblical Research* (London, 1917), 167–217, at 208.

<sup>20</sup> R. J. Campbell, *The New Theology* (London, 1907), 8–9.

<sup>21</sup> G. Parsons, 'Victorian Britain's Other Establishment: The Transformation of Scottish Presbyterianism', in idem, ed., *Religion in Victorian Britain*. Volume 1: *Traditions* (Manchester, 1988), 117–45, at 127–29.

<sup>22</sup> D. Macmillan, 'Scotland', in Lowther Clarke, ed., *Facing the Facts*, 223–50, at 228–30.

subsumed most Baptists) the threat of hell was as real and compelling as ever, an outlook that was also shared by the smaller and more conservative Presbyterian Churches in Scotland.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, while the nineteenth century had seen the development of a milder, more ameliorative concept of purgatory in English Catholicism,<sup>24</sup> the place of hell remained secure in Roman Catholic eschatology. Indeed, by the end of the nineteenth century, popular Roman Catholic depictions of hell were considered so severe as to have spawned a new variety of anti-Catholic rhetoric among freethinkers and more liberal Protestants.<sup>25</sup>

As hell was being pushed to the margins, in the Church of England at least there was a growing conviction of the existence of an 'intermediate' purificatory state between death and the last judgement. Advocated by the Tractarians since the 1830s, this concept complemented the Broad Church rebellion against hell and was increasingly in tune with the religious and moral outlook of late Victorian Britain. Significantly, by the turn of the century even some evangelical theologians were prepared to entertain the possibility of an intermediate state. Although personally unconvinced, Edward Litton cautioned his readers not to apply 'the name of heresy ... to opinions which, even if erroneous, do not affect the fundamentals of the faith, or to interpretations of Scripture which vary from those to which we have been accustomed'.<sup>26</sup> As Litton reasoned:

The Romish doctrine of purgatory must not be confounded with the belief of spiritual progress in the intermediate state, against which latter no objection from reason or Scripture can be urged. If the soul survives its separation from the body, and if it exists, not in a state of unconscious slumber ... but with its moral and intellectual faculties in activity, the inference seems to be that between death and the final judgment there must be progress, either in the one direction or the other.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> H. McLeod, *Class and Religion in the Late Victorian City* (London, 1974), 69–70, 226; C. Brown, *Religion and Society in Scotland since 1707* (Edinburgh, 1997), 30–31; MacLeod, 'Greater Love', 93–94.

<sup>24</sup> G. Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians* (Oxford, 1974), 163–69.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 172–73; J. A. Hill, ed., *Letters from Sir Oliver Lodge* (London, 1932), 82–83.

<sup>26</sup> E. A. Litton, *Introduction to Dogmatic Theology on the Basis of the Thirty-Nine Articles* (London, 1912), 542.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 308, 540–42.

Once again, the impact of the First World War served to accelerate existing trends. In 1916, Charles Gore, now Bishop of Oxford, published his summary of *The Religion of the Church as Presented in the Church of England*. Speedily compiled, Gore admitted that it could 'supply little in the way of proofs or justifications', its contents being the fruits of 'the meditation and study of a lifetime'.<sup>28</sup> This was especially true of his chapter on 'The Last Things and the Communion of Saints', where he rejected the traditional hell of 'unending conscious torment for the lost', argued instead for the dissolution of 'irretrievably lost spirits',<sup>29</sup> and maintained that:

[W]e are led to believe in an intermediate state of (in some sense) disembodied souls, in a condition of waiting or expectancy, following on the 'particular judgement' – that is, the disclosure of a man's real state which appears to be associated with each one's death. About this intermediate state we are told exceedingly little, but we are led to suppose that there is such a state both for good and bad ... We almost all instinctively tend to believe in some sort of purgatory, a state of cleansing and gradual emancipation and enlightenment for the imperfect ... In that we may – nay, I feel, we must – believe; but it is rather a conclusion of our reasoning than a part of what is revealed.<sup>30</sup>

However, while this belief in an intermediate state had some currency by the early 1900s, public prayers for the dead were not common in the Victorian or Edwardian Church of England. Although Anglo-Catholics had always argued that such prayers were consistent with the Prayer Book's 'Order for the Burial of the Dead' and were a natural corollary of the intermediate state and of the communion of saints,<sup>31</sup> it was a sign of the vestigial strength of Protestant orthodoxy that public prayers for the dead were rare in the Church of England prior to the First World War. For example, in 1903 only 217 churches marked All Souls' Day with special services, a figure that accounted for only one in ten of those churches that could be deemed Anglo-Catholic.<sup>32</sup> However, the coming

<sup>28</sup> C. Gore, *The Religion of the Church as Presented in the Church of England* (London, 1916), v.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 91–92.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 93–95.

<sup>31</sup> Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians*, 99–100.

<sup>32</sup> N. Yates, *Anglican Ritualism in Victorian Britain 1830–1910* (Oxford, 1999), 278–79.

of war saw a rapid transformation of the situation. In a sermon preached on All Souls' Day 1914, Archbishop Davidson noted with cautious approval the rapid diffusion of prayers for the dead since the outbreak of war.<sup>33</sup> Naturally, the Bishop of Oxford staunchly defended prayers for the dead in *The Religion of the Church*. While invoking the communion of saints and appealing for the proper observance of All Souls' Day, Gore proclaimed that:

We must recover without apology or concealment the practice of prayer for the dead. It is [a] matter of revelation that the departed are alive and waiting their final perfection. They need something and we need something. And therefore we may pray for them. That is a practice inevitably resulting from the revealed belief about the efficacy of prayer for others in all their real needs.<sup>34</sup>

Significantly, by this time a vocal element of Nonconformist opinion fully concurred with these sentiments. While minister of London's City Temple, R. J. Campbell made his opinion quite clear as to the merits of praying for the dead: 'It has antiquity on its side', he wrote, 'and, though greatly abused in pre-Reformation days, satisfies such a natural instinct, and is such a solace to the bereaved, that it is a pity Protestants everywhere should not be encouraged to return to it forthwith.'<sup>35</sup> Bernard Snell, another Congregationalist minister, was no less insistent in his endorsement of the practice.<sup>36</sup>

However, these developments were strongly resisted in other quarters. In the Church of England, matters came to a head in the summer of 1917 when forms of prayer were issued under the authority of the two archbishops to mark the third anniversary of Britain's declaration of war. Reflecting the prevailing mood, for the first time these included explicit prayers for the dead, a fact that prompted the evangelical Bishop of Liverpool, F. J. Chavasse, to lodge a strongly worded complaint with the Archbishop of Canterbury.<sup>37</sup> Another dissenting voice was that of E. A. Knox, the evangelical Bishop of Manchester. Although public prayers for the dead were already so common in his

<sup>33</sup> G. K. A. Bell, *Randall Davidson: Archbishop of Canterbury*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1935), 2: 830–31 n. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Gore, *Religion of the Church*, 96–97.

<sup>35</sup> R. J. Campbell, *The War and the Soul* (London, 1916), 14.

<sup>36</sup> B. J. Snell, 'If Only They Had Remained!', in F. Hastings, ed., *Our Boys Beyond the Shadow* (London, 1917), 35–44, at 43–44.

<sup>37</sup> Bell, *Randall Davidson*, 2: 828–30.



diocese that some of his clergy had inferred his tacit approval of them, Knox now bestirred himself to state that he could grant 'no permission' for the use of the prayers in question; this prohibition was then made public, prompting a flurry of debate in his diocese as well as a revolt among his cathedral clergy.<sup>38</sup> However, little seems to have been achieved by the rather isolated stand of Chavasse and Knox. At the end of the war, the forms of prayer issued under authority for Sunday 17 November 1918 were fulsome in their intercessions for the now victorious dead.<sup>39</sup> A few months later, the archbishops' committee charged with considering 'The Worship of the Church' in the wake of the 1916 National Mission of Repentance and Hope came down strongly in favour of including prayers for the dead in a revised Prayer Book.<sup>40</sup> Significantly, controversy over the intermediate state and prayers for the dead even rocked Presbyterian Scotland in 1917, after Norman Maclean (of the Church of Scotland) and J. R. P. Sclater (of the United Free Church)<sup>41</sup> expressed their approval of both in a volume of essays entitled *God and the Soldier*.<sup>42</sup> Unsurprisingly, such a radical break with Reformed orthodoxy was greeted with dismay by more conservative Presbyterians. The Free Presbyterian condemnation of *God and the Soldier* was unequivocal: it was 'a dark symptom of the Romeward drift in the Protestant church' and imperilled 'the future of religion in Scotland'.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, in one of the island presbyteries of the Church of Scotland an overture was considered that would have had Maclean 'summoned to the Bar of the General Assembly to be accused of Popish practices'.<sup>44</sup>

1917 was a turbulent year in another related respect, for in November 1916, and as the Battle of the Somme fizzled to an end, Sir Oliver Lodge published *Raymond: or Life and Death*. This book, which is probably the most powerful claim for spirit communication ever to have been published in Britain, had a deep resonance with a nation in

<sup>38</sup> 'What Lancashire Thinks', *The Guardian*, 2 August 1917, 582, and 9 August 1917, 609.

<sup>39</sup> *Forms of Thanksgiving to Almighty God to be used on Sunday, the 17th November, 1918: Being the Sunday after the Cessation of Hostilities between the Allied Powers and the German Empire. Issued under the Authority of the Archbishops of Canterbury and York* (London, 1918), 2.

<sup>40</sup> Wilkinson, *Church of England*, 82–84, 178.

<sup>41</sup> S. J. Brown, '“A Solemn Purification By Fire”: Responses to the Great War in the Scottish Presbyterian Churches, 1914–19', *JEH* 45 (1994), 82–104, at 94.

<sup>42</sup> N. Maclean and J. R. P. Sclater, *God and the Soldier* (London, 1917), 206–08.

<sup>43</sup> MacLeod, '“Greater Love”', 94.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* 87.

trauma and was a publishing phenomenon. As Herbert Thurston wrote for *The Month* in February 1917:

The appearance at the present time of such a book as *Raymond* was bound to create something of a sensation. Published at the beginning of last November, a sixth edition of this half-guinea volume had already been called for before the middle of the following month. On every hand one heard it discussed ...<sup>45</sup>

Ever since spiritualism had taken root in mid-Victorian Britain, most clergymen had taken a dim view of its pseudo-scientific claims and forbidden practices. However, while it was often seen as fraudulent or even diabolical, a handful of Anglican clergymen had been enthusiastic exponents of it, partly because its claims stood as a refutation of the greater threat of materialistic science. Furthermore, from 1882 the investigations of the Cambridge-based Society for Psychical Research (SPR) had given the claims of spiritualism some intellectual credibility and provided respectable scope for clerical interest. Indeed, such were developments in the SPR during the Edwardian period that Sir Oliver Lodge had boldly announced to the British Association for the Advancement of Science in September 1913:

The evidence ... goes to prove that discarnate intelligence, under certain conditions, may interact with us on the material side, thus indirectly coming within our scientific ken; and that gradually we may hope to attain some understanding of the nature of a larger, perhaps ethereal, existence, and of the conditions regulating intercourse across the chasm. A body of responsible investigators has even now landed on the treacherous but promising shores of a new continent.<sup>46</sup>

The war years inevitably saw a growing demand for the services of mediums at all levels of British society and unleashed a flood of spiritualist publications, many of which – such as J. S. M. Ward's *Gone West* and Wellesley Tudor Pole's *Private Dowding* – were of dubious provenance and quality. *Raymond* was very different. Written in a sober and reasoned style, there was no mystery as to its subject's identity

<sup>45</sup> H. Thurston, 'Communicating with the Dead', *The Month*, February 1917, 134–44, at 134.

<sup>46</sup> 'Extracts from Sir Oliver Lodge's Presidential Address', *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, November 1913, 132–44, at 144.

(Raymond Lodge had been a subaltern in the 2nd South Lancashire Regiment who had been killed in September 1915), and its author possessed the threefold attraction of being an eminent man of science, a grieving father and a professing Christian. Ironically, *Raymond* even contained an explicit caution against absorption in spiritualism, and its conception of a purposeful and progressive eternity, though not unique in spiritualist writing, bore a strong if superficial resemblance to more orthodox and dynamic conceptions of the intermediate state. Reactions from the Churches were mixed and seldom dispassionate. In an address at St Martin-in-the-Fields in February 1917, Lord Halifax, then President of the English Church Union, even accused Lodge of necromancy and of consorting with familiar spirits;<sup>47</sup> in turn, Halifax was attacked by the Master of the Temple, Ernest Barnes, a modernist churchman who had as little time for inflated Anglo-Catholic rhetoric as he had for spiritualism:

The difference between my own view of spiritualism and that of Lord Halifax can be summed up in a sentence by using an oft-employed metaphor. I do not think that there is any evidence to prove that telephonic communication with the other side has been established; his lordship thinks that a devil is speaking into the receiver at the other end.<sup>48</sup>

As the public debates surrounding the eternal prospects of the fallen, prayers for the dead, and the claims and practice of spiritualism serve to illustrate, there was intense interest (not to say fevered speculation) among civilians as to the fate and circumstances of the war dead. This evidence highlights the commonly neglected fact that Britain's first industrialized war was seen and experienced in religious, or spiritual, as well as in material terms. Naturally, the Churches took the lead in defining its religious parameters. As Stuart Mews has wryly observed, the war saw the 'identification of Germany with devilry', it being 'remarkable how quickly the devil and hell – topics which had been quietly and gradually discarded by the majority of leading preachers ... suddenly reappeared and took on a new significance'.<sup>49</sup> However, such views were widely shared in British popular culture; while the early war

<sup>47</sup> 'Life After Death', *The Guardian*, 15 February 1917, 133.

<sup>48</sup> 'Evil Spirits', *The Guardian*, 22 February 1917, 155.

<sup>49</sup> S. P. Mews, 'Religion and English Society in the First World War' (unpublished Ph. D. thesis, Cambridge University, 1973), 74.

myths of the Angels of Mons, the White Comrade, and even 'the drums of Ypres' gained great currency, a strong apprehension of the cosmic and even apocalyptic significance of the struggle persisted until the end of the war. In 1916, for example, a 'Patriotic Photoplay' was released entitled *It is For England*. The central character of the film was an army chaplain – the fearless Christian St. George – who was reincarnated as England's patron saint in order to thwart a diabolical plot hatched by naturalized Germans. In 1917, a collection of essays by Protestant clergymen appeared entitled *Our Boys Beyond the Shadow* in which R. C. Gillie remarked how 'some persons declare that young men are being called out of this life because they are needed in a great battle between right and wrong in the spiritual world'.<sup>50</sup> Finally, in the *Occult Review* of April 1918, one pundit was at hand to explain how its readers could give 'Psychic Help for Soldiers and Sailors' and who spoke of how 'a certain veteran Colonel, the chief of a Highland clan' could dream himself onto the battlefield – 'And whenever he has such a dream, some of the men of the regiment have said with sincere conviction – "The old Colonel is with us, we shall come through all right."' <sup>51</sup>

The eminent cultural historian Jay Winter has seen in all of this, and in wartime publications such as *Raymond* and *Private Dowding*, strong evidence of a 'spiritualist embrace' that linked the home and the fighting fronts.<sup>52</sup> However, many contemporaries would have taken issue with Winter's expansive definition of 'spiritualist' as it was very much a contested term. Leading spiritualists preferred the term 'spiritism', or even 'psychic science', while a broad definition of 'spiritualism' could include miscellaneous phenomena such as apparitions, hypnotism, telepathy, clairvoyance, pre-cognition and prophecy. This terminological slipperiness caused some problems, for, as M. A. Bayfield, an Anglican clergyman and a leading figure in the SPR, pointed out at the Church Congress held at Southend in 1920: 'Everyone is a spiritualist who is not a materialist, and Christianity itself is essentially a spiritualistic religion.'<sup>53</sup> What most people actually understood spiritualism to be was quite simply 'communication with the spirits of the dead'

<sup>50</sup> R. C. Gillie, 'Is Purgatory Necessary?', in Hastings, ed., *Our Boys Beyond the Shadow*, 175–86, at 178.

<sup>51</sup> J. W. Brodie-Innes, 'Psychic Help for Soldiers and Sailors', *Occult Review*, April 1918, 211–21, at 216–17.

<sup>52</sup> J. M. Winter, 'Spiritualism and the First World War', in R. W. Davis and R. J. Helmstadter, eds, *Religion and Irreligion in Victorian Society* (London, 1992), 185–200, at 193.

<sup>53</sup> 'Spiritualism', *Report of the Church Congress* (London, 1920), 146–75, at 154, 161–62.

through mediums, a point made emphatically by Sir William Barrett, a founding member of the SPR, in his wartime book *On the Threshold of the Unseen*.<sup>54</sup> Taking this definition of spiritualism, there was a clear disjuncture between the prevalence of spiritualism at home and its remarkable absence in the army.

Of course, there were soldiers serving in the British army who had either dabbled in spiritualism or who had spiritualist tendencies. Under the influence of a younger sister, Sir Douglas Haig had attended seances in the pre-war years, on one occasion being told by a medium of the interest shown in his career by 'a small man named Napoleon [who] had become changed for the better in the spirit world'.<sup>55</sup> As late as June 1916, Haig's sister had this reformed Napoleon very much in mind, assuring her brother that he had now been charged by God to attend him as a military advisor.<sup>56</sup> While Haig's religion had veered in a more orthodox direction by this stage of the war, Sir John French, his predecessor as commander-in-chief of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), was highly susceptible to spiritualist ideas. Early in 1915, and after only a few months of war, French wrote how his room at his headquarters was 'thick with the spirits of my dead friends'. He even confessed that 'I sometimes people my room with these glorious friends (all boys compared to me!), who have gone over. That "Silent Army". Alas, alas! The room is getting [too] small to hold even my intimate friends.'<sup>57</sup>

Nevertheless, army life was stony ground for spiritualism as most contemporaries understood it; adequate conditions for a seance could seldom be obtained or sustained in camps, billets and dugouts. Furthermore, in one of those rare examples where they were attainable over time, namely in an officers' prison camp at Yozgad in Anatolia, the seances held between February 1917 and October 1918 were entirely fraudulent. However, they did result in the repatriation of the two 'mediums' involved on the ground of insanity.<sup>58</sup> In the execution of their novel plan to escape, Lieutenants E. H. Jones of the Indian army and C. W. Hill of the Royal Flying Corps succeeded in convincing

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 162; W. F. Barrett, *On The Threshold of the Unseen* (London, 1917), 8–9.

<sup>55</sup> D. Cooper, *Haig* (London, 1935), 114.

<sup>56</sup> G. DeGroot, "We are safe whatever happens" – Douglas Haig, the Reverend George Duncan, and the Conduct of War, 1916–1918', in N. MacDougal, ed., *Scotland and War* (Edinburgh, 1991), 193–211, at 193.

<sup>57</sup> R. Holmes, *The Little Field Marshal: A Life of Sir John French* (London, 2005), 276–77.

<sup>58</sup> E. H. Jones, *The Road to En-Dor* (London, 1920).

some of their captors and some of their fellow prisoners of the reality of spirit communication. As Jones ruefully remarked:

[I]n the atmosphere of the séance, men whose judgment one respects and whose mental powers one admires lose hold of the criteria of sane conclusions and construct for themselves a fantastic world on their hypothesis. The messages we received from 'the world beyond' and from 'other minds in this sphere' were in every case, and from beginning to end, of our own invention. Yet the effect both on our friends and on the Turks was to lead them, as earnest investigators, to the same conclusions as Sir Oliver Lodge has reached, and the arrival of his book *Raymond* in the camp in 1918 only served to confirm them in their views.<sup>59</sup>

What compounded the difficulties for spiritualism in the army was the fact that mediums tended to be women; as Alex Owen has shown in her studies of women and late nineteenth-century spiritualism, mediumship was strongly associated with the vaunted feminine virtue of passivity.<sup>60</sup> In addition to the conspicuous lack of female mediums, or generally females of any kind, army culture was at odds with spiritualism in other respects. Plebeian spiritualism in the north of England was radical in its political orientation and inclined towards pacifism; after the introduction of conscription in 1916, eligible males from this background often became conscientious objectors. Furthermore, while Christian spiritualist churches had existed since the 1860s,<sup>61</sup> the army had no spiritualist chaplains and there is no evidence to suggest that any were ever sought from the War Office. Consequently, and in marked contrast to the situation on the home front, even in the later years of the war spiritualism hardly registered as an issue for army chaplains and church workers. Significantly, only one per cent of the three hundred memoranda received by the compilers of *The Army and Religion* report of 1919 made any reference to the existence of 'spiritualistic ideas' at all.<sup>62</sup> In fact, here the Churches had the opposite problem, as the young, male and overwhelmingly working-class soldiers of the British army were judged to be usually indifferent to spiritual matters. As David Cairns testified, their social environment, economic background and

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* x.

<sup>60</sup> A. Owen, *The Darkened Room* (London, 1989), 8, 10.

<sup>61</sup> G. K. Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society* (London, 1969), 143–47.

<sup>62</sup> D. S. Cairns, *The Army and Religion* (London, 1919), vi, 19–20.

defective education meant that 'The greatly prevailing drift of the evidence is that the men as a whole take a material view of life.'<sup>63</sup> Largely sheltered from the storm generated by *Raymond*, even at its height army chaplains could take an objective and dispassionate view of the threat from this quarter. In June 1917, William Duncan Geare, an evangelical Anglican, concluded from the popularity of *Raymond* that better standards of religious teaching were required from the Church of England; similarly, for the more Anglo-Catholic F. W. Worsley of the Chaplains' School of Instruction at Saint-Omer, the antidote seemed to lie in the growing revival of prayers for the dead.<sup>64</sup>

What must be stressed, however, is that this dearth of interest in spiritualism did not betoken a lack of interest in the afterlife among British soldiers of 1914–18. Based on their work with the YMCA, Maclean and Sclater found that:

There is little need for any man to go to our soldiers in order to convince them of Immortality, for they are convinced already that 'death's true name is Onward'. Votes have sometimes been taken in [YMCA] huts where the men congregate, as to whether they believe that their dead friends have gone out like the flame of a candle; and the usual majority against such a thought was in the proportion of nine to one.<sup>65</sup>

Similarly, in a volume of essays published in 1917 entitled *Our Mess*, which claimed to be a collection of 'Mess Table Talks in France', a chaplain confirmed the depth of interest in the afterlife among front-line troops in particular:

The interest is keener and more intelligent the nearer one gets to the front. [At base] men are saturated with the minor incidents of military life, drills ... food and drink, tent talk, promotions, decorations, and the rivalries to which these give rise; but when men realise that [the next] twelve hours may see them ushered into eternity, they want to know what the words mean.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* 74.

<sup>64</sup> W. D. Geare, *Letters of an Army Chaplain* (London, 1918), 84–85; F. W. Worsley, 'Beliefs Emphasised by the War', in F. B. MacNutt, ed., *The Church in the Furnace: Essays by Seventeen Temporary Church of England Chaplains on Active Service in France and Flanders* (London, 1917), 71–96, at 93–95.

<sup>65</sup> Maclean and Sclater, *God and the Soldier*, 181.

<sup>66</sup> D. MacFadyen, *Our Mess: Mess Table Talks in France* (London, 1917), 114–15.

Nevertheless, and as in civilian life, this firm belief in the survival of the soul masked a great deal of uncertainty regarding its details. As Maclean and Sclater noted, the general outlook was positive but nebulous: 'They believe that the dead are alive, and that they will meet them again some summer morning.'<sup>67</sup> While belief in eternal punishment had waned in late Victorian and Edwardian Britain, the war brought home not only the extent of its decline but also the confusion it had left in its wake. A YMCA worker who spent his period of wartime service 'among skilled mechanics' at a major base of the BEF observed that hell was largely dismissed by this more educated constituency. However, they had no firm idea as to what they could expect after death, only that 'men will get [a] fair judgment and chances for improvement in another world'.<sup>68</sup> Another witness for *The Army and Religion Report*, this time an infantry officer and former minister, confirmed that this confidence was also typical of the average infantryman, although here again it was more a product of hope than sound reasoning: 'Surely if Christianity is right, God will give the well-meaning multitude a second chance, and in the end smuggle them in.'<sup>69</sup>

Despite the use of hell as a literary motif by the more celebrated war poets, perhaps most powerfully by Wilfred Owen in 'Strange Meeting' (1918), the prevailing disdain for hell as a concept (not to mention a striking familiarity with Corinthians 15) was reflected in a contemporary soldiers' ditty that was put to a Salvation Army tune and widely sung in billets and estaminets:

The bells of Hell go ting-a-ling-a-ling  
 For you but not for me:  
 And the little devils how they sing-a-ling-a-ling  
 For you but not for me,  
 O Death where is thy sting-a-ling-a-ling,  
 O Grave, thy victor-ee?  
 The bells of Hell go ting-a-ling-a-ling,  
 For you but not for me.<sup>70</sup>

This lack of clarity and consensus about the afterlife prevailed as much

<sup>67</sup> Maclean and Sclater, *God and the Soldier*, 182.

<sup>68</sup> Cairns, *Army and Religion*, 18.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.* 19.

<sup>70</sup> J. Brophy and E. Partridge, eds, *The Long Trail: Soldiers' Songs and Slang 1914-18* (London, 1969), 46, 48.



among junior officers as it did among the other ranks. The celebrated Anglican layman Donald Hankey, who died as a subaltern on the Somme in October 1916, was alleged to have led his platoon over the top, and to his death, with the words, 'Men, if you are wounded it is Blighty; if you are killed it is the resurrection.'<sup>71</sup> However, this foreshortened eschatology was by no means the sum of Hankey's personal theology of the afterlife. In earlier reflections on the question of eternal torment, he had concluded that sometimes 'utterly corrupt' souls would be destroyed 'in the unquenchable fire' but most would be purified therein: 'Surely', he reasoned, 'it is more biblical (not to mention common sense) to suppose that fire is an instrument of purification and destruction rather than of torture.'<sup>72</sup> On the other hand, while concurring with the existence of an intermediate state, Alec De Candole, a lieutenant in the Wiltshire Regiment, saw its function in universalist terms when he wrote in 1918:

There is ... further progress in the life after death; and progress means struggle, and perhaps pain. Perhaps this progress will be endless, since the goal is infinite; but the idea that all eternity depends on this little space of earthly life is too disproportionate to be believed, and too terrible to be borne ... All we who have come from GOD shall return to GOD: for if GOD be GOD, Whose power is equal to His Will, no evil will, human or demonic, shall in the end withstand Him ...<sup>73</sup>

Despite overwhelming belief in an afterlife, there were some symptoms of doubt, especially among junior officers, whose superior education and notoriously limited life expectancy were conducive to habits of reflection on this question. James Hannay, a canon of St Patrick's cathedral, Dublin, who served as an army chaplain, was struck by the agitation of a young subaltern who was about to depart from Le Havre for the front. Noting his strongly Anglo-Catholic background, Hannay concluded that in this case religious education had proved worthless in the face of the ultimate test:

[T]hat boy had some teaching, quite definite as far as it went. He knew his Creed. He knew, or at one time had known, his Catechism.

<sup>71</sup> Maclean and Sclater, *God and the Soldier*, 202.

<sup>72</sup> D. Hankey, *A Student in Arms* (London, 1918), 103–04.

<sup>73</sup> A. De Candole, *The Faith of a Subaltern: Essays on Religion and Life* (Cambridge, 1919), 72–73.

He had been prepared for Confirmation. He actually carried about with him a little book of Eucharistic meditations, glowing with teaching so definite and so 'churchy' that many people would have cursed it. Yet after all that, he wanted to know whether he would live on in any fashion after the German bullet which he expected went through his head. I have no doubt that definite Church teaching is an excellent thing ... but no amount of definiteness will create the sense of reality.<sup>74</sup>

However, in another case, lingering doubts as to immortality were dispelled in an instant after a mute appeal to God in the midst of a heavy bombardment. As the officer in question told Maclean and Sclater:

Shells still burst all around, with smoke and an incredible roar everywhere ... the earth blasted and thrown high into the air – that was what girt me around. But these things were no longer real. As a dreamer awakes from a ghastly nightmare ... the danger and horror of the trench became unreal. *I was the reality. I could not be destroyed. I was filled with great comfort ... I was raised above destruction ... It made a great difference to me.*<sup>75</sup>

While there were disagreements as to the nature of an intermediate state beyond death and even some isolated doubts as to immortality itself, conceptions of the afterlife tended to be fairly mundane. Writing in October 1917, William St. Leger, a lieutenant in the 2nd Coldstream Guards, averred that: 'everyone comes into this world for two purposes', namely:

- (1) To do a certain work.
- (2) To fit himself for a better existence.

When he has done these two things I believe he is taken away by God to enjoy his rest.

Hence, St. Leger maintained that his fallen comrades were 'happy together – supremely happy' and that they were 'waiting for me to join them'; when he did, he believed, they would give him 'a great welcome ... I will understand everything, and be happy and content.'<sup>76</sup>

<sup>74</sup> J. O. Hannay, 'Man To Man', in MacNutt, ed., *Church in the Furnace*, 335–46, at 340.

<sup>75</sup> Maclean and Sclater, *God and the Soldier*, 109.

<sup>76</sup> London, Imperial War Museum, Department of Documents, P239 W. B. St Leger

However, these rather prosaic perceptions were almost sublime in comparison with the views that were widely entertained by the other ranks. Private Frank Richards of the 2nd Royal Welch Fusiliers recalled one discussion in which he and his comrades debated 'whether the spirits of the soldiers that were killed early in the War could wander through space and could look down upon us', one of them being of the opinion that they were 'looking down on us and dancing a two-step and clicking their heels together in holy glee to think that they have scrounged out of this blasted misery'.<sup>77</sup> As one Anglican chaplain lamented in a wartime article for the *Church Times*:

The ideas of many of the men as to the actual state of those who have 'gone west' are vague and even grotesque. This is largely due to the fact that when left to think the matter out for themselves their thoughts run along the line of life as they know it here. It is not surprising, therefore, that they are attracted by a poem that describes the soldiers' valhalla as a place of 'never-ending Wood-bines and never-closed canteen', or the ideas set forth in a book like 'Raymond'.<sup>78</sup>

While they might despair over its aesthetics, army chaplains did much to foster the prevailing mood of optimism regarding the afterlife. Militarily speaking, the old theology of hell was not only passé but positively demoralizing; as E. C. Crosse acknowledged, 'Gloomy subjects like the terrors of death made the worst possible subject for a sermon ... any attempt at profiteering of this nature was universally resented'.<sup>79</sup> However, for compelling personal and theological reasons, most were disinclined to believe that God would deal harshly with their former comrades. For many chaplains the conduct of their fellow soldiers (in whom they often discerned a host of latent virtues) made hell unthinkable. As Oswin Creighton wrote from Gallipoli in June 1915, 'I don't think that the war makes people more religious at once. But it makes them a great deal more serious and unselfish ... The men

(every effort has been made to trace the copyright holder, and the author and the Imperial War Museum would be very grateful for any information which may enable them to do so).

<sup>77</sup> F. Richards, *Old Soldiers Never Die* (London, 1983), 97.

<sup>78</sup> 'A Padre', 'The Religion of the Man at the Front', *Church Times*, 13 July 1917, 33.

<sup>79</sup> London, Imperial War Museum, Department of Documents, 80/22/1, E. C. Crosse (every effort has been made to trace the copyright holder, and the author and the Imperial War Museum would be very grateful for any information which may enable them to do so).

who are killed I feel absolutely sure must have many sins forgiven.<sup>80</sup> This vision was shared by G. A. Studdert Kennedy, who in 1918 urged that the war had served to push the parameters of salvation far beyond the confines of the Churches:

There are many men who die fine deaths who have no faith, or at least no conscious faith, in God or Christ as Son of God. How about them? Well, God is greater than the Churches . . . The river of eternal life breaks through a thousand channels and finds the soul of man.<sup>81</sup>

Studdert Kennedy's strident rejection of traditional eschatology was a theme that ran through much of his celebrated wartime verse. For example, in his poem 'Eternal Hope', he expressed his revulsion at the thought of eternal punishment:

Can the Father in His Justice burn in Everlasting flame  
Souls that, sunk in foulest squalor, never knew the Father's Name?

Can the Love of man be greater than Eternal Love divine?  
Can the heart of God be harder than this hardened heart of mine?

Can the pangs of Hell be endless, void of object, void of gain,  
Save to pay for years of sorrow with Eternity of Pain?

Cursèd be the foul contortion, that hath turned His Love to Hate,  
That hath cried at death's dim portal, 'Enter here, and 'tis too late,'

Cruel pride and vain presumption claim to grasp where angels grope,  
'Tis not God but mean man blindness dims the deathless star of  
Hope.<sup>82</sup>

The popular eschatology of military and civilian society was thus broadly similar: a rejection of the traditional hell prevailed alongside a widespread belief in an intermediate state, however vaguely or divergently this may have been understood. However, one area in which army chaplains seem to have been in advance of civilian practice was in praying for the dead. This was widely adopted, even by evangelical Anglicans, from the early months of the war. Since 1901, Anglican

<sup>80</sup> L. Creighton, ed., *Letters of Oswin Creighton, C. F. 1883-1918* (London, 1920), 130.

<sup>81</sup> G. A. Studdert Kennedy, *The Hardest Part* (London, 1918), 172-73.

<sup>82</sup> G. A. Studdert Kennedy, *Rough Rhymes of a Padre* (London, 1918), 45-46; see also, in the same volume, 'Well?', 'To-day Thou shalt be with Me' and 'Judgment'.

chaplains had been appointed for the regular army by Bishop John Taylor Smith, a former Church Missionary Society (CMS) missionary and a staunch Evangelical. However, few of his younger protégés were prepared to eschew a practice that the Chaplain-General was known to oppose.<sup>83</sup> As Harry Blackburne, a regular chaplain who was attached to the 3rd Field Ambulance, wrote at Christmas 1914: 'Hearing of more deaths in the trenches, I went up the line, and did the sad work of burying; the men always asking me to "say a prayer for him and his relations at home," and yet there are still some at home who quibble about prayers for the dead!'<sup>84</sup> Likewise, and despite being of Taylor Smith's generation, Bishop Llewellyn Henry Gwynne, another Evangelical, CMS missionary and the Suffragan Bishop of Khartoum, commenced praying for the dead soon after he arrived in France in August 1914.<sup>85</sup> As Deputy Chaplain-General on the Western Front from the summer of 1915, his support for the practice was so well known that one chaplain could not help remarking on its irony: 'The C. M. S. Bishop of Khartoum prints prayers for the dead for the use of all chaplains, and yet the Low Church Party still think it is a matter in dispute.'<sup>86</sup>

While evangelical Anglicans were drawn to this practice from an early stage, even Presbyterian chaplains seem to have experimented with prayers for the dead. However, this required a little circumspection. John White, who served as a chaplain to the 5th Scottish Rifles (or Cameronians) and who made much of the militant Presbyterian lineage of his regiment, was a case in point. White's reflection on the fallen which concluded his published account of his service in France was highly suggestive of a personal departure from Reformed orthodoxy:

They have entered on a higher curriculum; but they still remain the same living, thinking, loving sons and brothers that we knew and loved here. Do they minister to those for whom they have died, and who live through the weary days in loneliness and grief ...? What says our heart? We think of them and retain our fellowship with them in prayer, and they with us; we cannot think other-

<sup>83</sup> M. Snape, *The Royal Army Chaplains' Department, 1796–1953: Clergy Under Fire* (Woodbridge, 2008), 178.

<sup>84</sup> H. W. Blackburne, *This Also Happened on the Western Front* (London, 1932), 32.

<sup>85</sup> Birmingham, University of Birmingham, CMS Archives, XACC /18/F/1/51, Diaries of L. H. Gwynne, 2 December 1914.

<sup>86</sup> R. Keable, *Standing By: War-Time Reflections in France and Flanders* (London, 1919), 42.

wise if we believe that they are not dead but live men who still love and serve.<sup>87</sup>

More directly, in one of the essays featured in *Our Mess*, a Presbyterian chaplain admitted that: 'I value highly ... the increasing desire to pray for our living dead, and I have even encouraged it'.<sup>88</sup>

Burial services were, of course, the main context in which prayers for the dead were offered. In this setting, the inadequacies of the Prayer Book's 'Order for the Burial of the Dead' were abundantly clear to many Anglican chaplains and a tendency to improvise was endemic.<sup>89</sup> For example, E. V. Tanner of the 2nd Worcestershire Regiment composed his own 'Shortened Form of Burial Service' which he thought 'followed in a general way that laid down in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer'.<sup>90</sup> In 1917, Eric Milner-White, in civilian life the chaplain of King's College, Cambridge, and now a senior army chaplain, complained that the Prayer Book's burial office had 'failed badly in the days of death', forcing chaplains to contrive their own services; significantly, he had only come across one chaplain who had refused to 'pray directly for the dead'. The cumulative result of these experiments had, he maintained, been very positive, producing a departure from the Prayer Book service that was 'no less beautiful but far more human, with not less but more true and ancient divinity in it; and thereby deeper suitability, honesty and comfort'.<sup>91</sup> Given their experiences, in the wake of the National Mission three senior Anglican army chaplains were among the most strident advocates of reform on the archbishops' committee charged with considering 'The Worship of the Church'. While addressing sundry other weaknesses in the Prayer Book, they concluded their joint statement to the committee with the assertion that:

[A]bundant use under strange and pathetic circumstances has revealed the defects of the Burial Service, and we are sure that

<sup>87</sup> J. White, *With the Cameronians (Scottish Rifles) in France: Leaves from a Chaplain's Diary* (Glasgow, 1917), 110.

<sup>88</sup> MacFadyen, *Our Mess*, 123.

<sup>89</sup> L. MacDonald, 1914–1918: *Voices and Images of the Great War* (London, 1991), 179.

<sup>90</sup> London, Imperial War Museum, Department of Documents, P310, E. V. Tanner (every effort has been made to trace the copyright holder, and the author and the Imperial War Museum would be very grateful for any information which may enable them to do so); Amport, Andover, Amport House, Royal Army Chaplains' Department Archive, E. V. Tanner, 'An Army Chaplain's Work in War-Time'.

<sup>91</sup> E. Milner-White, 'Worship and Services', in MacNutt, ed., *Church in the Furnace*, 175–210, at 179–81.

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those who have been at the Front will never wish to go back to its use unmodified ... a direct and simple commendation of the soul of the departed to God, and a prayer for the bereaved should be added.<sup>92</sup>

In addition to prayers for the dead, army chaplains also played a major role in helping to popularize the notion that those who gave their lives for their country would inherit eternal life, a 'doctrine of justification by works with a vengeance' as one critic sourly remarked in the *Expository Times*.<sup>93</sup> However, this common belief, which proved so obnoxious to conservative Protestants, cannot be dismissed simply as a knee-jerk product of an over-heated 'war theology'.<sup>94</sup> Firstly, it was implicitly based on the theology of an intermediate state; of those who died for their country, most *would* eventually reach heaven. Secondly, its roots also lay in the dauntless optimism of pre-war liberal theology. In his controversial summary of *The New Theology*, R. J. Campbell had made a passionate argument to the effect that salvation was being earned, usually quite unconsciously, by all who sought the betterment of humanity:

Wherever you see a man trying to do something for the common good, you see the uprising of the spirit of Christ ... In church or out of church, with or without a formal creed, this is the true way in which the redemption of the world is proceeding. Every man who is trying to live so as to make his life a blessing to the world is being saved himself, saved by becoming a saviour. Ordinary observation ought to tell us that untold thousands of our fellow-beings, even among those who never dream of going to church, are being saved in this way ... The Christ – the true Christ, who was, and is, Jesus, but who is the deeper self of every human being – is saving individuals by filling them with the unselfish desire to save the race.<sup>95</sup>

If these sentiments applied, as Campbell claimed they did, even to

<sup>92</sup> *The National Mission of Repentance and Hope: Reports of the Archbishops' Committees of Inquiry. The Worship of the Church, being the Report of the Archbishops' Second Committee of Inquiry* (London, 1919), 39.

<sup>93</sup> H. Cernyw Williams, 'The Fate of those who have Fallen in the War', *Expository Times*, April 1919, 329.

<sup>94</sup> Mews, 'Religion and English Society', 80.

<sup>95</sup> Campbell, *New Theology*, 210.

Robert Blatchford, the fiercely anti-clerical editor of the *Clarion*,<sup>96</sup> it was clear from August 1914 that they were still more applicable to those millions of British soldiers engaged in saving Europe from what Lloyd George described as ‘the thraldom of a military caste’ which had plunged the world into ‘a welter of bloodshed and death’.<sup>97</sup> While, for a combination of moral, theological and patriotic reasons, the intrinsic merit of their sacrifice was taken for granted by most British churchmen, as recruiting fever swept the nation in the autumn of 1914, it was also propounded by Lloyd George himself. Speaking at the City Temple that November, the Liberal (and Baptist) Chancellor of the Exchequer pronounced martial courage to be a redeeming Christian virtue and even offered some favourable reflections on Islam:

It is appointed that men should die once, and after that the judgment. Brave men die, but they need not fear the judgment. I think we are too ready to scoff at creeds which promise the glories of their paradise to those who die for the cause or for the country they are devoted to. It is but a crude expression of a truth which is the foundation of every great faith, that sacrifice is the surest road to redemption.<sup>98</sup>

The concept of salvation through dying for one’s country was, therefore, widely canvassed long before it became an unofficial tenet of the Army Chaplains’ Department. Following Haig’s appointment as commander-in-chief of the BEF in December 1915, chaplains played a burgeoning role in promoting morale among Haig’s citizen soldiers on the Western Front. At a conference with his army commanders in January 1916, Haig, whose religious convictions proved a major source of personal support over the next three years, instructed them to take their chaplains firmly in hand. As the commander-in-chief put it, ‘We must have large minded, sympathetic men as Parsons, who realise the Great Cause for which we are fighting, and can imbue their hearers with enthusiasm . . . Any clergyman who is not fit for this work must be sent home.’<sup>99</sup> While this remodelling of the chaplains’ role saw them

<sup>96</sup> ODNB, s. v. ‘Robert Peel Glanville Blatchford’.

<sup>97</sup> F. L. Stevenson, ed., *Through Terror to Triumph: Speeches and Pronouncements of the Right Hon. David Lloyd George, M. P., since the Beginning of the War* (London, 1915), 13.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.* 57–58.

<sup>99</sup> D. Haig, *Haig’s Autograph Great War Diary* (microfilm; Brighton, 1987), 15 January 1916.



acquire greater freedom of movement and unfettered access to front-line trenches, its theological corollaries were soon made clear as well. In March 1916, Lieutenant-General Sir Hubert Gough, a protégé of Haig's who was soon to take command of the Fifth Army, was invited by Bishop Gwynne to address a conference of Anglican chaplains. In his address, Gough made it clear that in their sermons salvation should be linked to sacrifice for the national cause:

[I]n my opinion a great deal too much importance is laid in sermons on the individual's welfare and good, as it is in England in every walk of life. Not enough is made of our public duty, of one's duty to the whole Nation, or to the whole Army. We are entreated from the Pulpit to be 'good' in order that we may save our individual souls ... If you wish to rouse enthusiasm, harp not so frequently on the saving of my soul; but talk to me of how I can help to save the soul of England and the Empire. If I can do something for that, my own soul will be safe enough.<sup>100</sup>

Significantly, senior officers in the BEF came to expect a certain line of preaching from their chaplains. After cancelling all church parades for that particular Sunday, in September 1916 the commander of the 21st Division, Major-General D. G. M. Campbell, toured its constituent units in order to deliver his own religious address to the men. As one chaplain remembered:

He told them ... that a man was much better for being a good Christian and saying his prayers [and] he further laid down that a man guilty of cowardice was lost for ever – his conception of eternal damnation being apparently the sentence of death by court martial. Then he quoted the Bishop of London to the effect that however deeply a man had sinned if he was killed on the battlefield and had faith he was sure of salvation.<sup>101</sup>

A few months later, the senior Anglican chaplain of the 8th Division was removed as being theologically unsatisfactory. As E. H. L. Beddington, one of its staff officers, remembered:

<sup>100</sup> H. Gough, *Address Delivered by a well-known Corps Commander to the Chaplains of his Corps in France* (London, 1916), 6.

<sup>101</sup> London, Imperial War Museum, Department of Documents, 67/180/1, J. B. Marshall (every effort has been made to trace the copyright holder, and the author and the Imperial War Museum would be very grateful for any information which may enable them to do so).

I went in to GHQ to see ... the [Assistant] Chaplain General [of the Fourth Army] ... He asked me the reason for my request and I said that our Chaplain would stress all the time that unless you were really good your chances of going to Heaven were poor, whilst the doctrine needed for men of an infantry division, whose expectation of life was bound to be short, should in my view approximate to that of the Mohammedan religion, i.e., he that dies in battle goes to Heaven. [He] nodded assent, but asked what I thought should happen to our Chaplain. I suggested duty at a Base Hospital.<sup>102</sup>

As a result of these developments, *The Army and Religion* report, which was compiled during the latter part of the war and published in 1919, sniffed that 'The idea of salvation by death in battle for one's country has been widely prevalent, and is one of those points in which the religion of the trenches has rather a Moslem than a Christian colour.'<sup>103</sup> While E. C. Crosse was emphatic that he did not preach 'the very doubtful theology of Mohammed, that the soldier who dies in battle for a just cause is thereby assured of eternal salvation',<sup>104</sup> many chaplains would have contested this depiction of their theology. E. S. Woods was unapologetic that certain smug, pre-war conceptions had been discarded, claiming that 'The official exponents of Christianity have too commonly allowed, or even encouraged, the notion that a Christian's chief function is to save his own soul; and religion, for many, has tended to become a refined form of selfishness.'<sup>105</sup> Another chaplain explained that:

We do not hold out to the British Tommy or Jock any expectation of a Valhalla where heroes feast eternally, or of a Mahommedan [*sic*] Paradise where he will have all the joys he has denied himself here; but we can say to him that so far as his act in serving his country has any quality in it of love for the highest, of sacrifice, of brotherhood, of solidarity, it is a real preparation for sharing the life of eternal blessedness; for that life is a life lived out on those principles.<sup>106</sup>

<sup>102</sup> London, King's College, Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives, GB99 KCLMA Beddington.

<sup>103</sup> Cairns, *Army and Religion*, 19.

<sup>104</sup> IWM, 80/22/1, E. C. Crosse.

<sup>105</sup> E. S. Woods, 'The Great Adventure', in MacNutt, ed., *Church in the Furnace*, 429–54.

at 434.

<sup>106</sup> Macfadyen, *Our Mess*, 125–26.

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While very few wartime sermons by serving chaplains have survived,<sup>107</sup> this claim is borne out by the sermon notes of E. V. Tanner for a thanksgiving service held in September 1917, as the 2nd Worcestershire Regiment was recuperating after fighting in the Ypres salient. Here, the implication was not that their dead had been granted immediate access to heavenly glory but that they had been given gainful employment in an intermediate state:

For them we need not mourn ... A nobler activity is theirs today [and] greater opportunities for the development of character and a sphere of wider usefulness, as we Christians firmly believe ... No, for our fallen comrades we need not grieve. God has other work for them to do.<sup>108</sup>

Similarly, while the sermon notes of Bishop Gwynne reflect a powerful sense of the activity and significance of 'the blessed Dead', he never presumed that they were actually in heaven. In a sermon preached at a memorial service for an officer of the Coldstream Guards in the winter of 1916–17, Gwynne declared that:

They being dead yet speaketh [*sic*] ... We are Trustees of the blessed Dead ... There behind the line in Flanders [and] France are the forests of crosses which mark their resting places – They speak more eloquently than words – begging us never to lay down our arms ... And so we think of Geoffrey Campbell ... on active service in that other world.<sup>109</sup>

Inevitably, however, there were those who misconstrued this message or who were unhappy with its theological implications, especially its reliance on works and the promise of heaven that the intermediate state apparently implied. Firstly, there was a dissentient minority in the Chaplains' Department itself. One chaplain, for example, preferred the sharp demarcations of traditional eschatology and objected to the idea 'that the future life is a kind of heaven and hell amalgamation society'.<sup>110</sup> This theology also jarred with Guy Rogers, whom Bishop Gore had described as 'one of the most thoughtful and

<sup>107</sup> M. Brown, *The Imperial War Museum Book of the First World War* (London, 1991), 248.

<sup>108</sup> IWM, P310, E. V. Tanner.

<sup>109</sup> Birmingham, University of Birmingham, CMS Archives, XACC /18/F/4/4–9, Sermon books of L. H. Gwynne.

<sup>110</sup> Macfadyen, *Our Mess*, 117.

ablest of the young Evangelicals'.<sup>111</sup> While a chaplain with the Guards Division on the Somme, Rogers wrote in November 1916:

It is absurd that, under the stress of the moment, we should commit ourselves to saying that death in obedience to duty strikes such a balance that it atones for a life which may have been one long dereliction of duty. The brave man, I say, would look at us and say, 'Do you think so much of bravery that you think more of it than of the Gospel you are supposed to preach ...?' The real conclusion he would draw would be that our own faith in the unique value of Christ's redemptive work was on the wane.<sup>112</sup>

Although Anglo-Catholic in his views, F. W. Worsley was also scathing about 'the claim that a man who dies in battle is for that reason necessarily saved'. As Worsley remarked, 'Many of us have met a similar belief in popular theology before the war. We have stood at the bed upon which lay the body of a hardened and oft-convicted criminal to hear some relative say "Ah, poor dear, he's in heaven now."<sup>113</sup>

While one Anglican chaplain remarked that it was those soldiers 'who had given little thought in the past to religious matters' who were most easily persuaded that death 'in the cause of righteousness ... justifies a man in the sight of God',<sup>114</sup> a small but vocal element of conservative Evangelicals among the rank and file took strong exception to this kind of preaching from their chaplains. However, and because they ranked as officers, military etiquette seems to have ensured that chaplains were not directly challenged on this score. While a denominationally mixed group of fourteen evangelical soldiers protested 'To the Churches at Home' about this theology, which they argued 'belittles our Saviour's great Sacrifice',<sup>115</sup> most seem to have vented their spleen at services and meetings held by the safely civilian YMCA. Maclean and Sclater's *God and the Soldier* spoke of an awkward confrontation after a voluntary service in which a preacher had voiced some current perspectives on the subject of death and the afterlife. However, this sermon outraged one of his hearers, who consequently took him to task:

<sup>111</sup> Birmingham, University of Birmingham, CMS Archives, XACC /18/Z/1, Army book of L. H. Gwynne.

<sup>112</sup> G. Rogers, *A Rebel at Heart* (London, 1956), 125.

<sup>113</sup> Worsley, 'Beliefs Emphasised by the War', in MacNutt, ed., *Church in the Furnace*, 93.

<sup>114</sup> 'A Padre', 'The Religion of the Man at the Front', 33.

<sup>115</sup> Mews, 'Religion and English Society', 206–07.

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A kilted, grim-faced Scot waited and asked this question: 'Do you really believe that every soldier who dies in battle goes to heaven?' ... The spirit of all the Puritans glowed in his deep-set eyes. He made it clear that he had no use for such a gospel. He was a Christian and not a Mohammedan. His body was cheap – a shilling a day; his life was cheap – mere fodder for guns; his self-respect required that his soul should not be cheap. And a heaven gained through a splinter of shell would be but a cheap heaven indeed!<sup>116</sup>

Though not subjected to a similar tirade, J. D. Robertson, a Baptist minister from Burnley, was presented with a difficult dilemma during a 'Question Time' in a YMCA hut in 1918:

A soldier with a very serious countenance rose, and fixing his eyes on me, said: 'We were going into action recently, and assembled to hear an address from the Padre. In substance he said that we should be over the top in a short time, and it might be that all would not come back, but he added: "Fear not death, my lads; whoever dies for his country is sure of Heaven." Now I want to ask you if such an assurance was in harmony with the teaching of Jesus Christ?' He added one word more: 'It was the general opinion of the men who heard it that he was speaking what he thought was comforting rather than what was true.'<sup>117</sup>

Reluctant to contradict the chaplain in question directly, Robertson cautiously replied that 'the best preparation for death is to repent, and make peace with conscience and with God'.<sup>118</sup>

At the other end of the ecclesiastical spectrum, Roman Catholic eschatology also stood firm. While sacramental practice was adjusted to fit the needs of the time, there was no retreat from essentials. Much to the concern of one Catholic officer, even on active service Catholic soldiers could still be regaled with harrowing descriptions of hell. As C. P. Blacker noted of a sermon in July 1916:

Father Leahy then began to describe what would happen to those who cast aside the chance of salvation. Hell would be their fate. Hell, he said, was a fiery place peopled by hideous beings, half-

<sup>116</sup> Maclean and Sclater, *God and the Soldier*, 202–03.

<sup>117</sup> J. D. Robertson, 'Question Time in the Hut', *The Red Triangle*, November 1918, 103–04, at 104.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

animal, half-human, whose sole occupation was to devise and perform unthinkable tortures of which the worst feature was that they were never-ending.<sup>119</sup>

Similarly, *The Catholic Soldiers' and Sailors' Prayer-Book* of 1917 stated in a section entitled 'HOW TO GET TO HEAVEN':

There is only one way of getting to Heaven and that is by dying in a state of grace, and remember that, as a general rule, we die in the state in which we are living . . . If therefore you have the misfortune to be in the state of mortal sin, ask God's pardon at once for your sins by a fervent act of contrition . . . and make up your mind to go to Confession at the first opportunity and to live in a state of grace in future.<sup>120</sup>

The vital task of making the sacraments available to the sometimes widely dispersed Roman Catholics of the British army was by no means an easy one. Nevertheless, it was made considerably easier by a frequent and even lax recourse to general absolutions on the part of many Roman Catholic chaplains. William Doyle, a Jesuit priest attached to the largely Roman Catholic 16th (Irish) Division, explained the rationale for these expedients in a letter to his father in 1917:

We reap a good harvest with confessions every day, at any time the men care to come, but there are many who for one reason or another cannot get away, hence before going into the trenches, which nearly always means death for some poor fellows, we give them a General Absolution. I do not think there can be a more touching or soul-inspiring sight than to see a whole regiment go down upon their knees . . . I love to picture the foul garment of sin falling from every man there at the words of Absolution, and to watch the look of peace and happiness on the men's faces as they lift their rifles and fall into rank, ready for anything.<sup>121</sup>

However, Doyle was unusual among Roman Catholic chaplains in ministering to a large concentration of his co-religionists. More typical was the situation of J. B. Marshall, who served the scattered Roman

<sup>119</sup> J. Blacker, ed., *Have You Forgotten Yet? The First World War Memoirs of C. P. Blacker* (Barnsley, 2000), 114.

<sup>120</sup> P. Casgrain, *The Catholic Soldiers' and Sailors' Prayer-Book* (London, 1917), 10.

<sup>121</sup> A. O'Rahilly, ed., *Father William Doyle S. J.: A Spiritual Study* (London, 1932), 494–95.

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Catholics of the 62nd Infantry Brigade. On 12 June 1916, and following a visit to the 1st Lincolnshire Regiment in their front-line trenches, Marshall let slip:

I met a couple of men and got them to make an act of contrition together while I gave them absolution. I could not hope to hear everybody's confession ... my plan was to get two or three together and give them absolution ... All seemed glad to see me. I chatted with them, heard a few confessions and scattered absolutions in the free and easy way we do out here. How my rector will have to look after me when at last I arrive on the English mission!<sup>122</sup>

Nevertheless, even Marshall was taken aback by the methods employed by a more senior Roman Catholic colleague:

He told me that when action was on he told men to make an act of contrition at any time, and they could know that he was absolving them, because he kept pronouncing a general absolution over the whole battlefield. This struck me as going a bit far even for the theology of the front.<sup>123</sup>

Although generally considered to be better instructed, Roman Catholic soldiers were by no means impervious to the notion of salvation by death in battle. Just after Major-General Campbell emphasized this message to the men of the 21st Division in September 1916, J. B. Marshall was surprised to discover 'a poor wounded Catholic who had long postponed his confession [who] told me that he had taken courage from this dictum to go into battle without approaching the sacraments.'<sup>124</sup> While Marshall deplored Campbell's usurpation of the Sabbath and dismissed his message as 'a shocking medley of bad theology',<sup>125</sup> Roman Catholic soldiers also seem to have envisaged the after-life in much the same prosaic terms as their Protestant counterparts. In July 1917, William Doyle wrote:

Before the last big battle I gave the men a few talks about Heaven, where I hope many of them are now ... I reminded them of the saying of the Blessed Curé d'Ars: 'When we get to Heaven and see all the happiness which is to be ours for ever, we shall wonder why

<sup>122</sup> IWM, 67/180/1, J. B. Marshall.

<sup>123</sup> Brown, *Imperial War Museum Book of the First World War*, 249.

<sup>124</sup> IWM, 67/180/1, J. B. Marshall.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

we wanted to remain even one day on earth' ... I said, the man who falls in the charge is not the loser but immensely the gainer, is *not* the unlucky one but the fortunate and blessed. You should have seen how the poor chaps drank in every word, for rough and ignorant as they are, they are full of Faith: though I fear their conception of an ideal Heaven, for some at least, would be a place of unlimited drinks and no closing time ...<sup>126</sup>

To summarize: what this paper has argued is that historians have too readily subscribed to the idea that such was the scale of mortality in Britain during the First World War that orthodox religion simply could not cope with the national trauma; indeed, it had so little to offer in terms of consolation for the bereaved that the rampant growth of spiritualism, particularly after the publication of *Raymond* in November 1916, registered not only the nation's grief but its sense of despair with the Churches as a whole. This is a view which Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the most zealous and incautious propagandist for spiritualism, would have cheered to the echo. However, it clearly ignores some fundamental points. Firstly, the experience of immediate family bereavement was not as universal as the prevailing mythology of the First World War implies. Secondly, and not least because of theological developments in the later nineteenth century, orthodox religion was a broader, more flexible and more dynamic force than its detractors have allowed. During the First World War, and with relatively few exceptions, the Churches accommodated change with remarkable pragmatism and dexterity. The growing currency of an intermediate state, the rapid rise of public prayers for the dead, and, in Roman Catholicism, the adjustment of key sacramental practices reflected the extent of this change. Thirdly, the relationship between spiritualism and mainstream Christianity was much more complex than the prevailing analysis admits, not least because they were commonly locked together at a personal level as the example of Sir Oliver Lodge serves to illustrate. Fourthly and finally, neglected evidence from the British army shows a clear disjuncture with the situation on the home front. Here, and among the least religiously susceptible members of British society – namely young, working-class males – even at the end of the war spiritualism had remarkably little appeal or currency. Instead, current views of the after-life reflected the progressive teaching of the Churches at home, the

<sup>126</sup> O'Rahilly, ed., *Father William Doyle*, 509–10.



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concept of an intermediate state providing not only reassurance for the individual soldier but also an important means of buttressing collective morale by promising ultimate happiness in the hereafter. Although its orthodoxy was disputed by an evangelical minority, its underlying pragmatism was comparable to that demonstrated by Roman Catholic chaplains in their widespread – and again, sometimes questionable – use of general absolutions. Whatever his travails on earth, ultimate happiness was not to be denied the British soldier of 1914–18, however prosaically he may have envisaged it.

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