“God will decide my fate”:
How Soldiers on the Western Front Used Christianity to Rationalize or Condemn the First World War
by Paige Norton

At the onset of World War I in August 1914, many young boys and men signed up for what they envisioned as a glorious, yet brief and without too much bloodshed, battle for their respective fatherlands. Those naïve, youthful notions were swiftly and mercilessly crushed, for example by an estimated casualty count of three hundred thousand in just the French army within merely four months.[1] Troops searched for any kind of respite in the horrific landscapes of the trenches, and for many, this took form in the outlet of religion. While there are numerous personal narratives of soldiers’ religious experiences on the front lines, none has been so imprinted on public memory as the Christmas Truce of 1914. Aside from this rare showing of common humanity, there has not been much study of how soldiers on all sides of the war experienced faith in a place and time that seemingly resembled hell. This paper will discuss how Christianity interplayed with patriotism, gave grounds of reasoning for soldiers, or propelled them further to question faith, country, and self. How did religious practice or thought influence one’s willingness to kill and be killed? Did it give them purpose in the killing machines of modern warfare, or did it serve only to make them happy cannon fodder for inept generals? There are a variety of perspectives among German, French, and British soldiers on this question. Soldiers of the First World War turned to religion in droves, whether that be for those who were particularly devout and felt they were fulfilling a mission from God and country, or those who classified themselves as non-religious and went to mass or communion simply for reminders of comforts from home or out of fear of what would be waiting for them on the other side of death.

One way soldiers coped with the horrors they were witnessing was what academic Joseph F. Byrnes called “the search for allies in heaven.” In his book, *God on the Western Front: Soldiers and Religion in World War I*, Byrnes examines how religious experiences shaped a soldier's mind and their outlook on war. The term “allies in heaven” originates from the French

[1] Antoine Prost, “War Losses,” in *International Encyclopedia of the First World War* (Freie Universität Berlin, October 8, 2014), https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/war-losses/?version=1.0.

saint Joan of Arc (canonized after the war), who had visions of the archangel Michael.[2] Byrnes writes, "heavenly personalities inhabited the imaginations of the men in the form of assumed visions or simple faith in signs and miracles."[3] These heavenly personalities took their most famous form in the Angels of Mons story of August 1914, in which bow-wielding angels descended from the skies and aided the ailing British forces. This story was written by Arthur Machen, who proclaimed until his death that it was fictional. However, his assertion does not account for individuals like English nurse Phyllis Campbell, who reported that many soldiers in her care were experiencing these visions; or Brigadier General John Charteris, who wrote home to his wife about the visions; or a lieutenant colonel, cited in a 1915 issue of the *London Evening News,* who stated that he saw squadrons of cavalry men riding along with English troops.[4] In his book, *Angel of Mons*, David Clarke asserts "These stories suggest that among the thousands of English soldiers trapped in the path of the advancing Germans there were a few individuals who came to believe they had been saved by a miracle."[5]

In another instance of perceived divine intervention on the battlefield, Byrnes looked to the Battle of the Marne in what he calls one of the few unabashed stories of it. This time, it came from the lips of a captured, dying German priest in a French army hospital, who claimed to have seen the Virgin Mary as she had appeared to Saint Bernadette, or the Notre Dame de Lourdes. He claimed that his unit was winning when suddenly the Virgin appeared and turned away from them, using her hand to push German forces back. Two additional wounded officers who had come in with the priest reportedly saw a statue of Notre Dame de Lourdes and exclaimed, "Ah, the Virgin of the Marne."[6] On the French side of this miracle, Father Stéphen Coubé gave an official interpretation of the miracle, titled *Missel du Miracle de la Marne* (The Missal of the Miracle of the Marne). In his preface, Father Coubé explains the distinctions between types of miracles that were made by Bishop Charles Gibier of Versailles; the previous year, he stated that there were "absolute" miracles like resurrection or "relative" miracles, in which God conducts natural forces in a way that changes results. Father Coubé, in a statement that opposes those of

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[2] Joseph F. Byrnes, *God on the Western Front: Soldiers and Religion in World War I* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2023), 45.

[3] Byrnes, *God on the Western Front*, 45.

[4] Byrnes, *God on the Western Front*, 46.

[5] David Clarke, *The Angel of Mons: Phantom Soldiers and Ghostly Guardians* (Chichester, West Sussex, England: J. Wiley, 2005), 54.

[6] January 1917 issue of the *Paper of the English Channel* as cited by Christine Walczak in "The Missal of the Miracle," Sisters of Charity of Saint Jeanne Antide Thouret, May 26, 2020, paragraph 8.

the captured German soldiers, classified the Battle of the Marne as a relative miracle, that God had helped generals make decisions and had given the soldiers the determination they needed, rather than intervening directly. Coubé explains further the events of September as they relate to the retreat of the Germans at the Marne: September 3 started with many prayers to Joan of Arc from French soldiers, and from the fifth to the eighth were the days of prayer to France's national Saint Geneviève with the feast of the Nativity of Mary on the last day, and finally on September 12, the Germans made their major retreat, the same day as the feast of the Holy Name of Mary. Coubé taught that everything happened according to God's will, and he recognized the Marne as an expression of God's favor to France.[7]

These are not the only reports made by British and French soldiers of heavenly appearances. Saint Thérèse of Lisieux's home Carmelite convent received thousands of reports from soldiers who claimed that she had protected them or given them the motivation to continue onward. Soldiers affectionately referred to her as "little sister" and "little flower."[8] In a letter to the convent, Lance Corporal James Dalton stated, "I prayed to the Little Flower, and suddenly a nun appeared before me… She was beautiful and was on her knees, her head bent down and her hands folded; but her face wore an expression of intense sadness, as if she deeply pitied us."[9] Private Paul-Henry Joly recounted, "One evening, on August 2, we were huddling, a full half-section of us, around a shack, which was being smashed to pieces under heavy gunfire…. As for me, while I was praying to the Blessed Virgin, I invoked Sister Thérèse…. All of a sudden… I saw her standing at the foot of a machine gun that was there. She was looking at me and blessing us all. She then told me with a smile: 'Don't be afraid, I have come to protect you…' And as a matter of fact, not one of us died, and we soon got out of this awful situation safe and sound."[10] Another soldier, unnamed by Byrnes, explained that, though he had distanced himself from religion, he was brought back to belief when she appeared to him after he begged for her to get him back to his wife and children.[11] In addition to these, many letters contained stories of relics of Thérèse miraculously stopping bullets or shrapnel from piercing the men. One such account is

[7] Missel du Miracle de la Marne, as cited by Joseph F. Byrnes in *God on the Western Front: Soldiers and Religion in World War I*, 50.

[8] Byrnes, *God on the Western Front*, 61.

[9] James Dalton, "She Was on Her Knees," *Stronger than Steel: Soldiers of the Great War Write to Thérèse of Lisieux* (Brooklyn, NY: Angelico Press, 2021), 27.

[10] Paul-Henry Joly, *Stronger than Steel*, 74.

[11] Byrnes, *God on the Western Front*, 61.

that of Corporal Henri Bellois: "A revolver bullet pierced my jacket, my squad notebook and my wallet, and in addition my waistcoat, in front of the heart. But the bullet deviated without reaching my shirt thanks to the little medallion of Sister Thérèse which was there as a rampart." Corporal Bellois, as well as many others, sent their Croix de Guerre medals to the convent as a show of gratitude for her protection, Bellois saying, "This Croix de Guerre belongs to her rather than to me, in the table of decorations which is exhibited in her honor. And I thank her from the bottom of my heart: Thank you, my Little Thérèse!"[12]

As for the Germans, there were no soldier reports of miraculous appearances, aside from those in opposition to German forces at the Battle of the Marne. This, however, does not mean that German troops were without their own devotions. Popular saints honored by Protestants and Catholics alike included Saint Michael the Archangel, Saint George, Saint Joseph, Saint Barbara, Saint Moritz, and Saint Hubert. Each held their own patronage that fit perfectly into wartime religion. Saint Michael the Archangel is the patron saint of military personnel, Saint George of cavalry, Saint Joseph of hard workers, Saint Barbara of artillerymen, Saint Moritz of infantry, and Saint Hubert of riflemen.[13] As opposed to having actual visions of the divine beings, German religious expressions were often in the form of art. One such expression is that of a postcard that Byrnes examines, entitled *Heldentod* (the hero's death). Byrnes describes the image: "against a purple, battle-scarred land and a darkening skyscape flecked with the pale red of a late sunset, a luminous angel cradles the head of a dying soldier, before bearing his soul to heaven."[14]

Aside from man-made images of angels and patron saints, German soldiers also believed they encountered religion in seeing what Byrnes calls "wayside wonders in battle zones." Soldiers witnessed what they thought to be signs from the heavens in the curious survival of crucifixes or statues of the Virgin. Byrnes describes one such occurrence at Saarebourg, where a monument of the crucifixion was partly destroyed, and German soldiers were struck by the sight of the body of Christ remaining completely upright on the pedestal, although the cross no longer remained. In a similar vein, the statue of the Virgin and Child sitting on top of the Basilica of Notre Dame de Brebières at Albert in Picardy inspired soldiers to wonder which side the Virgin was on. Byrnes cites historian Paul Fussell, who explained that a rumor began that when the

[12] Henri Bellois, "1917 May," *Courier from the Front: Excerpts from Correspondence Received at the Carmel of Lisieux during the First World War* (Lisieux, France: Les Archives du Carmel de Lisieux, 2022), 4.
[13] Byrnes, *God on the Western Front*, 61–62.
[14] Byrnes, *God on the Western Front*, 56.

Virgin fell to the streets, the war would end. He further states that "When this proved harder than it looked, the Germans promulgated the belief that the side that shot down the Virgin would lose the war."[15] Additionally, Fussell explains that the remaining Virgin and Child also became a symbol of the impacts of war on the innocent, particularly women and children. French liaison officer Paul Maze is cited on his thoughts on the hanging statue: "The statue of the Virgin Mary, in spite of many hits, still held on top of the spire as if by a miracle. The precarious angle at which she now leaned forward gave her a despairing gesture, as though she were throwing the child into the battle."[16] Along with viewing the seemingly divine survival of these monuments, soldiers on all sides generally had varying devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Virgin Mary. Byrnes cites the preparation of a Sacred Heart scapular medal by the Archdiocese of Munich and a French mother's letter to the Annales de Notre Dame de la Salette, which stated that her son, because he had a medal of the Virgin and carried a Sacred Heart image, had been spared several times.[17]

Even for those soldiers who openly mocked religion, there still existed those small notions of Christian morality, even if not stated outright. Inarticulate Christianity refers to what young English officer Donald Hankey experienced from his peers in the trenches. He was sure that many of the soldiers he was with were good men and were religious in that sense only, because they never spoke to God. Hankey explains, "Here were men who believed absolutely in the Christian virtues of unselfishness, generosity, charity, and humility, without ever connecting them in their minds with Christ." He also explains that the chaplains were wrong about these men, saying, "They saw the inarticulateness, and assumed a lack of any religion. They remonstrated with their hearers for not saying their prayers, and not coming to Communion, and not being afraid to die without making their peace with God." He further states, "As a matter of fact, I believe that in a vague way lots of men do regard Christ as on their side."[18]

On the other side of this spectrum from inarticulate is that of diffusive Christianity, a term used by English churchmen to function as a label for Christianity that was composed of "good neighborliness, friendliness to the church… and an appreciation of Anglicanism as a support of

[15] Byrnes, *God on the Western Front*, 58.
[16] Byrnes, *God on the Western Front*, 58.
[17] Byrnes, *God on the Western Front*, 60.
[18] Byrnes, *God on the Western Front*, 74.

English identity."[19] This version of Christianity was characterized by religious objects such as the Bible itself, pictures, or rosaries used as luck charms instead of or alongside a traditional religious use. This type of religion was also rampant with the philosophy of fatalism, with the idea that it was simply the will of God that you die or are wounded when it is your time.[20] Byrnes describes this as "religious belief in the broadest sense." However, he also explains that while fatalist expressions were common, when pressed, clergymen often found that the soldier's fatalism was more providential and divine than anything.[21]

Though the term that bears this definition is English in nature, diffusive Christianity (or at least the fatalist parts of it) was certainly expressed by those on all sides. German theology student Alfons Ankenbrand demonstrates this, saying, "My future life belongs to God, my present one to the Fatherland, and I myself still possess happiness and strength." Byrnes further explains that resigning oneself to the will of God could come as a profound experience of faith, experienced with joy when one made it safely through a battle. Another soldier decidedly stated, "Happy are those who believe." Byrnes references one lieutenant who wrote to his mother to say they would be reunited in Heaven with happiness eternal, to which Byrnes writes, "This resignation was expressed as reliance on divine providence and not as unadorned fatalism." Another, whom Byrnes highlights, volunteered at age seventeen and wrote home to his girlfriend, "God will decide my fate."[22] Of course, not all religious soldiers were perfectly resigned to death, even if they did believe in assurances that they would reunite with loved ones in Heaven. Here, Byrnes mentions Edward Tennant, who assured his mother two days prior to his death that he had taken communion and was carrying his medal of the Blessed Virgin, but he was still seemingly questioning his faith and what meaning it could hold when looking upon piles of bodies. Tennant stated that he did not believe even God knows. Officer Eric Lubbock wrote his mother a cautiously faithful message: "We should feel proud that we are suffering for that step and sweating blood to help the world, as One once sweated blood before to save it." He explains to his mother that death has to be the start of something better: "If this world with all its passions, sorrows, and griefs" is all that exists, "then the great Giver of Life is but a torturer." Private J. Bowles, in a far more condemning view of the Creator, states that, "in war there is no

[19] Byrnes, *God on the Western Front*, 75.
[20] Byrnes, *God on the Western Front*, 76.
[21] Byrnes, *God on the Western Front*, 78–79.
[22] Byrnes, *God on the Western Front*, 80.

place for a God of Love" and no need to fear future suffering after death as their lives in the trenches were already a "hell that the devil himself would be proud to reign over."[23]

Regardless of the faithless, such as Private Bowles, religious belief centered around the First World War did not end just because the war itself did. One incident connected to the war actually made news as recently as December of 2024: the healing of a World War I veteran at the Sanctuary at our Lady of Lourdes over a century prior was confirmed as the seventy-first miraculous healing at the shrine. The story of the holy site originates from Saint Bernadette, who at age fourteen claimed to see a Marian apparition at a grotto while fetching firewood. The Virgin asked her "to drink of the water of the spring, to wash in it and to eat the herb that grew there as an act of penance." The next day, the once muddy grotto was now flowing with clear water.[24] Since then, Catholics have made the pilgrimage to Lourdes in the hopes of being healed by the waters.

One such story is that of the seventy-first confirmed miracle, mentioned above, of Royal Navy veteran John "Jack" Traynor, who in 1923 went on a pilgrimage to the site. Traynor was born in Liverpool in 1883 to a devout Irish Catholic mother. He was present on the first day at the Gallipoli landings in 1915, where he was later caught in machine gunfire, which hit his head and arm. The injuries to his arm severed the nerves and left him paralyzed on his right side, while the injuries to his head caused him to have seizures, and he was sent back to England. Eight years later, in 1923, he was sent to a hospital for incurables but chose to join a parish trip to Lourdes. He was, by all intents and purposes, gravely ill for the first three days of the trip. On the second day, he experienced a severe seizure, and doctors tried to return him to where he was boarding, but Traynor persisted and made it to the baths. "They took me into the bath and bathed me in the usual way." He explained, "I never had an epileptic fit after that." While in the bath the next day, his right leg began to flail, and he regained use of it shortly thereafter. He then insisted on going to the nearby Church of the Holy Rosary to sit for the Eucharistic procession, and when the Archbishop of Reims passed him, his right arm also began to flail, and he regained its use as well. Doctors of the Lourdes Medical Bureau examined him before he left and stated that he was now able to walk perfectly, retained full use of his right side, his seizures had stopped, and even

[23] Byrnes, *God on the Western Front,* 82.

[24] Thérèse Taylor, *Bernadette of Lourdes: Her Life, Death and Visions* (New York, NY: Burns & Oates, 2003), 88–90.

that an opening in his skull to relieve pressure on his brain had started to close completely on its own. They crafted an official report stating that Seaman Traynor's "extraordinary cure is absolutely beyond and above the powers of nature."[25] On December 9th, 2024, the Archbishop of Liverpool officially announced that Traynor's case had finally been recognized as a miracle after extensive research by doctors at the Lourdes Medical Bureau.[26]

Soldiers of the First World War experienced Christian religion in a diverse range of styles. Whether that be miraculous healings, such as that of John Traynor, or simple pure faith in things like the "wayside wonders" of the upright Virgin and Child at Albert. Soldiers from different countries experienced religion in a multitude of ways, each one different but holding defining characteristics, such as the apparitions of the "allies in heaven" witnessed by the British and French or devotional art produced on German postcards. Though the actual religious experiences differ among nationalities, many soldiers, though they may not have realized it, would have been united in their expressions of religion. Soldiers of British, French, and German origin all expressed inarticulate Christianity in their general belief in God or Christ being on their side, with phrases carved into souvenirs like "Gott mit uns!" or "Dieu et mon droit!" (God with us, God on my side). All sides also experienced diffusive Christianity, imbued with a fatalistic philosophy of dying when it was your time, "religious belief in the broadest sense." Though this resignation to die in sacrifice of God and country was often characterized as fatalistic, Byrnes distinguishes these as mostly more providential, reassuring views of a serene afterlife that provided soldiers with the incentive to move forward, even at risk of death. Finally, soldiers shared a common devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Virgin across borders. Soldiers of all sides shared at least religion in common, and despite many questioning how God could exist in so horrific a time and landscape, troops increasingly turned to religion for spiritual (and evidently physical) healing or comfort, or in some cases, even miracles.

[25] Plinio Maria Solimeo, "John Traynor's Miraculous Cure in Lourdes Finally Confirmed," Irish Society for Christian Civilization, February 18, 2025.

[26] Rev. Malcolm McMahon, "Statement on the Case of John Traynor," The Shrine to Our Lady of Perpetual Succour, February 2, 2025.

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