

THE BIBLE IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR

As its contribution to the 100th anniversary of the start of the First World War, SGM Lifeworlds has re-created its Active Service John's Gospel as a tool for reflection, debate and prayer on the war and its legacy. This download looks at the role of the Bible in the war.

The role of religion in the First World War is a confusing one. Both sides were Christian cultures. Both claimed that their cause was just and that God was on their side. It was a time of real compromise for the church, but with a century of hindsight, what can we learn? And what role did the Bible play?

God on our side

When war broke out in Europe in the summer of 1914, there was almost no popular resistance to the idea. Cheering crowds gathered in Trafalgar Square when war was declared. Hundreds of thousands of men rushed to volunteer, confident that the venture would be short, successful, and an adventure not to be missed. In the fervour, dissenting voices were few and far between – intellectuals, politicians of both sides, the media and the church were all united in their support.

While some church leaders might have had personal doubts, no major denomination officially questioned the war. Some saw it as a trial to be endured, others as judgement from God for the sins of the nation – the neglect of the Sabbath, drunkenness and lack of care for the poor. Some even saw it as an opportunity to be welcomed, and many ministers and bishops used their platforms to actively recruit for the army. Patriotism and Christianity blurred together, as the Bishop of Durham preached “the holiness of patriotism”.

Among the most outspoken was the Bishop of London, A F Winnington-Ingram. “We are on the side of Christianity against anti-Christ” he told soldiers in one sermon. “We are on the side of the New Testament which respects the weak, and honours treaties, and dies for its friends and looks upon war as a regrettable necessity... It is a Holy War, and to fight in a Holy War is an honour.”

Politics and the church were deeply interwoven in Germany too, in different ways. The 19th century had seen several waves of anti-Catholic oppression. This culminated in Bismarck's Kulturkampf in the 1870s, an attempt to homogenise the German church under protestant, Lutheran norms. This was religion as nationalist ideology, and it included the romanticised idea that Germany had replaced the Jews as the chosen people of God – a notion that was to resurface in a more dangerous form in later years.

Hence ‘Gott mit uns’ – God with us – the phrase emblazoned on the helmets and belt buckles of German soldiers. It was “a protestant as well as an imperial motto,” says historian Alan Davies, “the expression of German religious, political, and ethnic single-mindedness.”

Kaiser Wilhelm himself certainly saw the war in overtly religious terms. It was a “crusade against evil – Satan – in the world, prosecuted by us as tools of the Lord” he wrote. “God wants this struggle, we are his tools. He will direct it, we need not worry about the outcome, we will suffer, fight and be victorious under His sign!” When victory was secure the world would enjoy “the German peace, God’s peace, in which the entire liberated world will breathe a sigh of relief!”

To kill or not to kill

The war recruiters were not ashamed to be calling men to take the lives of others. Bishop Winnington-Ingram called men to “band in a great crusade - we cannot deny it - to kill Germans.” Archdeacon Basil Wilberforce went so far as to say that “to kill Germans is a divine service in the fullest sense of the word” in one of his sermons in 1914. Others of the same faith were reading the same Bible and drawing opposite conclusions.

One of them was Dr Alfred Salter, a Christian and a socialist, who wrote a widely reprinted essay called *The Faith of a Pacifist*: “Christ in khaki, out in France thrusting His bayonet into the body of a German workman. See! The Son of God with a machine gun, ambushing a column of German infantry... No! No! That picture is an impossible one, and we all know it.”

Bert Brocklesby was another who took the command “thou shalt not kill” at face value. A young Methodist preacher, he took to the pulpit in early 1915 and spoke from Romans 12:19-21, a passage on resisting vengeance and loving one’s enemies. He was not invited to speak again, and when he refused the call-up under conscription, spent the war in a series of prisons and work camps.

Almost every denomination supported the war. The only exception was the Quakers, which has a long history of pacifism. Even there, a third of eligible Quaker men had joined the war effort by 1918. Other Quakers chose to work for peace more proactively, and formed the Friends Ambulance Unit to retrieve and care for the wounded.

The mainstream church had little to say about the conscientious objectors, and were occasionally actively hostile. While in prison in Winchester, one objector wrote in his diary about a visit from an Anglican chaplain. “Christ would have spat in your face”, the chaplain told him. In his book on the conscientious objectors, Will Ellsworth-Jones tells the story of two men going to church on a Sunday while stationed at a hard labour camp nearby. The congregation threw stones at them and drove them away, while the parson stood and looked on.

Some objectors never reconciled themselves to the church after the war. A Congregationalist named Percy Leonard returned to his church after release from prison in 1919. The minister greeted everyone at the door on the way out, but “when he saw me he refused to shake my hand” Leonard remembered. “That was the last time I went to church and it was the last time my wife went to church.”

The chaplains

One way that the church did engage more positively with the war effort was through the chaplaincy service. Because they were considered vital to morale at home, vicars were exempt from conscription, but many chose to serve as chaplains instead. The Church of England initially banned its ministers from signing on, but many did so anyway, as there was a huge shortage of chaplains. The army only had 117 at the start of the war, but by 1918 the army had four million men and recruiting chaplains was a major task.

It was not an easy job, partly because the original mobilisation plans forgot to include them. Chaplains turned up unexpectedly afterwards, attached to hospitals rather than battalions. Many found themselves very much in the way, with no provision for transporting or housing them, with no job description or training.

Their first responsibility was to run services, especially the weekly Church Parade, where troops were inspected and marched to church, where they expected a rousing and inspiring sermon on such things as duty, courage and discipline. Chaplains also presided over burials and comforted the wounded. Otherwise, it was up to them to make themselves useful, and with the officers busy, many chaplains took on a role as social organisers. They set up clubs with coffee bars, games and reading rooms, with programmes of lectures and concerts. They ran canteens and delivered mail. One chaplain began selling cakes at the social club he was running, and used the profits to buy a hand-cranked cinema projector from Paris.

These sorts of initiatives gave the chaplain a clear role, and won favour and trust with the men. "Hospital visiting, concerts, boxing, meetings and classes" one chaplain described, "each and all of these gave scope for what, I can only repeat, is the essence of a chaplain's work under such conditions – personal touch with officers and men, and the endeavour to use each contact as a spiritual opportunity."

At the start of the war chaplains were discouraged from visiting the firing lines, but that changed once their value in raising morale was established. Not all did, but some advanced right to the front lines and even beyond them. Rev Theodore Bayley Harvey made a point of accompanying rescue missions into no-man's land to pull men from the mud or bring back the wounded, often under fire. In his 18 months as a chaplain he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order, Military Cross and Victoria Cross, the latter commendation singling out an occasion when he rescued a wounded man just ten yards from the enemy. He was killed a month before the armistice, one of 163 chaplains who died in the war.

Bible ministry

It is in this context that *Scripture Gift Mission* was working, printing Bible resources for troops. The Gospels were widely used by chaplains and Christian agencies used in the field. One chaplain, Ernest Luce, was stationed with the YMCA in the Balkans. "On Tuesday morning I received in eight large parcels 5,000 testaments and portions," he wrote in his diary, "the very generous gift of the Scripture Gift Mission in response to my request."

His usual approach was to mention in services that these were available. "Usually there has been a sequel to the services when men have come along early in the week and desired a

Testament or Scripture Portion. These I have gladly supplied after further talk and in almost every case winning the man to definite decision for Christ” he wrote. He would then invite them to sign the declaration form at the back of **SGM**’s Scriptures. This decision form was in fact inserted at the suggestion of fellow chaplains, as a way for soldiers to record their commitment. It was a comfort and a reassurance.

One story in the **SGM** archives shows how many men signed the form: “A lance-corporal sent us a letter from the trenches stating that he had followed with much interest and prayer the distribution of the scriptures which had been sent out by the mission to the front. He enclosed a treasury note for £1, and as one looked at it, one felt that it had been through many engagements, so dirty and crumpled an appearance it had. He told us that his work was after every engagement to go round and collect those who had laid down their lives for their country and to search their pockets. He found in nearly every case that the man possessed an ‘Active Service’ New Testament containing Lord Roberts’ message, but the most cheering thing about it was that the men had signed the Decision Form at the end. This soldier had seen the results and felt that would like to have a part in sending out the word of life to those who needed it and wanted it. “

Chaplains could also use the hymns that were included at the back, while conducting services. Otherwise, the Scriptures were printed simply and cheaply and usually with no further comment or explanatory notes – and yet, there was huge demand for the Bible, from British troops and right across Europe.

Writing to their supporters, Scripture Gift Mission described the stories they were getting back: “We hear of forty men being in a trench. One man has a gospel, and he writes that it is seldom in his own possession as everyone wants to borrow it; can’t we send him out sufficient that all his comrades might have a testament of gospel of their own? Naturally we comply with this desire, and he is gladly supplied.” Another letter from a soldier told **SGM** how his colleagues all wanted a pocket Testament like his, and since he had none, he had cut his up to share it round – could he have another one, and some to give away?

Despite the large print runs, letters like this kept coming in – requests from Christian soldiers and sailors, from chaplains, nurses, charity workers and churches. “There is unceasing demand for the scriptures. The hundreds and hundreds of applications for grants which reach us from all parts do not seem to diminish in the least, notwithstanding the large numbers which have been circulated. It would seem almost incredible had we not carefully checked and analysed statistics.”

Hunger for God

In the field, those Scriptures were being read, and the stories were coming back of men finding faith. “Only recently I was in a very big engagement,” wrote one, “when bullets and shells were bursting around us every minute, and none of us knew when one would burst and blow us to pieces. Dear friend, that was the time when I turned to God and prayed for protection, and he has answered my prayers. I confess that it is only lately that I have turned my thoughts to heaven. I am so thankful for the Testament, and promise I will read it every spare moment I have out here in the trenches.”

In Britain, churches were using **SGM** Scriptures with German prisoners, with striking effect. "In some of the places we hear of real revival; those interned have time to think, very little to read beyond the scriptures which have been supplied, and when men begin to read the scriptures for themselves it finds an entrance to the heart."

In Russia, the distribution was unprecedented – an explosion of Bible distribution that had never been seen before. "Your circulation this year will be beyond that which any society has ever reached in this country" wrote **SGM**'s agent in Russia. He had partnered with the Royal family, who paid for print runs and wrote an endorsement. Sunday schools in Britain raised further funds for printing, but not enough to satisfy demand. He sent a desperate telegram to London in capital letters, telling the head office "YOU WILL LOSE THE OPPORTUNITY OF THE AGE UNLESS YOU GET BANK TO WIRE MONEY."

The Russian postal service had agreed to deliver Scripture parcels free of charge, and they were turning up in unexpected places, as far as the Caucasus mountains. Word quickly got out that the Bible was available. "Many soldiers are walking six, and some even eight miles to get a gospel. Such is the hunger after God's word."

As it struggled to source paper and keep up supplies, **SGM** reflected on this opportunity. "Never during the 28 years of the existence of the **SGM**, or the 138 years history behind the Naval and Military Bible Society, have such opportunities been presented to any society for sowing the good seed in such large numbers." The things that surprised them most were the receptiveness to the Bible, that there was so much demand, and that the Bible was speaking. Men were reading the Scriptures alone, in trenches and camps, and finding God for themselves. Here was "the wonderful power manifested in the working of the spirit of God in the hearts of the men, through reading the scriptures only, apart from any human instrumentality."

Sometimes the Bible spoke at just the right time, in the most unlikely of circumstances. One story came in from Russia, of a soldier finding a piece of paper blowing along the road. He picked it up and it was Psalm 23 in Russian. "To this weary, war-broken soldier, these words came as a balm to the soul" wrote **SGM**'s agent in Russia. The soldier was so flooded with peace and joy that he wanted to thank the people who had circulated these Scriptures. The only address on the paper was the printer, so he wrote to them, and they passed the letter on to **SGM**.

A British soldier, having declined the offer of a Gospel earlier, then found one on the seat of a train and decided he should read it. "I have it with me even today," he wrote to **SGM**, "and have carried it though some of the bloodiest battlefields of the Gallipoli Peninsula. On an evening, when the roar of the guns would cease, I read at least one chapter. Sometimes I was crouched up in a trench, and the bullets were whizzing over my head, by somehow I felt safe, and I am truly thankful that I have been spared to write this letter."

An unknown legacy

Religion and the Bible were used to justify the war and motivate the troops, twisted to suit nationalist ideals. But it was also the inspiration for real acts of sacrifice, men willing to follow Christ in giving up their lives for those around them. And the Bible was speaking throughout the war, in thousands of smaller, unseen incidents.

SGM had distributed 43 million items of Scripture by the end of the war, right across Europe, to soldiers and civilians, prisoners and refugees. These little gospels had no explanatory notes, no commentary, no religious trappings. They were just the words of the Bible – words of hope, of comfort, of peace. Life words.

And in the darkness, in the loneliness, in the chaos, they spoke - loud and clear. Truth instead of lies. Peace instead of conflict. Hope in a place of despair. Life words in the face of death.

As **SGM** wrote at the time, “we have followed the troops in training from the day of enlistment – to the day of embarkation – to the trenches – and the firing line. At every step men have been met with the offer of God’s word, and hundreds and hundreds have been led to Christ. Only eternity will reveal all the work that has been done in the hearts of men during the long dark days of this worldwide war.”

Sources:

We will not fight, Will Ellsworth-Jones, Aurum Press, 2008

Mud, Blood and Poppycock, Gordon Corrigan, Cassell, 2004

Wilhelm II, John C Rohl, Cambridge University Press, 2014.

The Royal Army Chaplains Department – Clergy Under Fire, by Michael Snape, Boydell Press, 2008

The **SGM** archives at the British Library and London Metropolitan Archives

To order copies of the WW1 Anniversary Gospel
visit www.sgmlifewords.com/WW1

