

American Religions and War

BY SARAH KOENIG

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Americans do not like to think of the United States as a nation that engages in holy war. The term conjures visions of the rise of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, or, if we are looking for a Christian comparison, the Crusades. The underlying sense is that holy wars are something that other people do: medieval Christians, or present-day radical Islamists. The term "holy war" thus serves to mark the wars of others as irrational, primitive, and fanatical, while casting American state violence as rational, modern, and religiously enlightened.

The four books reviewed here challenge this assumption about Americans and war. Through examinations of key state and extra-state conflicts in U.S. history, these books bring into sharp relief how frequently Americans have equated their government's military aims with the will of God. Religiously motivated violence has played an important role in our history: we might say that it is coded into our national DNA. Admittedly, these texts illumine how Americans have found hope and redemption within times of violent struggle, and how religious convictions have motivated Americans to protest war and other forms of violence. However, they also invite us to contend more soberly with Americans' long love affair with holy war motifs.

RELIGION, VIOLENCE, AND AMERICAN IDENTITY

John Carlson and Jonathan Ebel's *From Jeremiad to Jihad: Religion, Violence, and America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012, 250 pp., \$34.99) provides a broad theoretical and historical overview for thinking about American ideas of religious violence. This edited collection explores

case studies ranging from Puritan wars against Native Americans in the seventeenth century to the Virginia Tech shooting in 2007; there are examinations of racial and gendered violence and explorations of the ethics of war. The wide-ranging essays are united by the conviction that exploring the intersections of American religion and violence provides “crucial insight into the meaning behind ‘America’ – its history, ideals, character, identity, sense of purpose, and place in the world” (p. 2).

Carlson and Ebel set the tone of the collection with a provocative and highly readable theoretical introduction. They set out the terms “jeremiad” and “jihad” as two ways to understand ideological formations of religion and violence in America. The term “jeremiad,” a reference to the biblical prophet Jeremiah, refers to “a biblically rooted, sustained lament about a nation or people and their failure to live up to divinely ordained ideals” (p. 10). While a lament in form, the jeremiad also proclaims a vision of what a people are, should be, or can be. American jeremiads, from the Puritans to the present, have thus served as a powerful mode of social unification as well as critique. “Jihad,” often used by non-Muslims to conjure specters of Islamist violence, has a broader and more theoretically useful definition in Carlson and Ebel’s formulation. They note that the term means “effort” or “exertion” in Arabic – in other words, struggle that may be, but is not necessarily, violent in nature (p. 10). The pairing of these terms is intentional. Carlson and Ebel want their readers to recognize that jeremiads and jihads are not so different: both are modes of religious understanding that have the potential to catalyze violence. Using these terms broadly and analytically can mitigate the tendency to set Islamic violence apart from other forms of religious violence. Singling out Islamic violence as qualitatively different can obscure the multiple ways that violence has been religiously motivated and religiously justified in U.S. history. As these essays show us, American Christians have appealed often to divine providence to justify violence against those deemed to be outside the fold. American Christian violence has typically fallen hardest on marginalized peoples – American Indians, African Americans, and religious outsiders. Christianity also provides a wealth of resources for resisting, re-imagining, and redeeming violent events, however, and this collection points toward some of those possibilities: pacifism, just war theory, and critiques of practices like torture.

THE CIVIL WAR AS A NATIONAL SACRIFICE

At least 620,000 Americans died in the Civil War – and both Union and Confederate partisans believed that they were doing the Lord’s work. Harry S. Stout’s *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War* (New York: Penguin, 2007, 576 pp., \$18.00) explores the paradox that Abraham Lincoln identified in his second inaugural address: “Both [sides] read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other” (p. 426).

Stout argues that the Civil War's unprecedented casualties were enabled and justified by a burgeoning civil religion that depicted the war as a holy sacrifice that would purify and strengthen the American nation. Both the Union and the Confederacy created ritual structures to strengthen their side's moral vision and sense of divine calling. They celebrated fallen soldiers as martyrs, designated special days of prayer and fasting, and preached in sermons and speeches that God was on their side. Though Stout searched for dissenting voices among the clergy, he found that religious leaders on both sides were "virtually cheerleaders all" for the righteousness of their side's cause and the sureness of their side's victory (p. xvii). Abraham Lincoln was one of the few public voices that approached the conflict from a more nuanced perspective. In the war's later years, he increasingly invoked divine Providence, but "without the self-righteous evangelical piety that went along with so much patriotism in the North and the South" (p. 145).

Although Lincoln refused to adhere to the religious models of those around him, he still oversaw the Union's escalation from limited to total war. Lincoln's grim calculation, according to Stout, was that the Union would eventually win a war of attrition due to its larger population. The goal of emancipation provided moral justification for the Union's shifts, first, toward a war of attrition, and second, to a war that targeted civilians' homes, food supplies, and

property. After the war, the U.S. army applied these tactics in a new setting – against Plains Indians defending their homelands (p. 325).

While recognizing emancipation as an unequivocal moral good, Stout encourages us to contemplate how even moral causes can be used to justify immoral activities. He also asks us to contend with the profound confidence that Christians felt toward their own side's cause, even when

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Christians felt profound confidence toward their side's cause in the Civil War, even when it necessitated killing fellow Christians or flouting typical war practices. During war, Harry Stout notes, American civil religion has often trumped confessional religions.

THE FIRST WORLD WAR AS HOLY WAR

Whereas the Civil War has been depicted as a grand national sacrifice, the First World War is often portrayed as a moment of grand religious disillusionment, in which Americans' dreams of progressive reform were crushed

by the cruel machinery of trench warfare. Historian Philip Jenkins argues otherwise in *The Great and Holy War: How World War I Became a Religious Crusade* (New York: HarperOne, 2014, 448 pages, \$15.99). In his sweeping study of religious attitudes during the war, he finds not disillusionment but intensification and transformation. The war, Jenkins tells us, was nothing less than a “global religious revolution” (p. 5). It resulted in dramatic

realignments of national boundaries and political theologies that reverberate to the present.

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Jenkins makes two important contributions to understanding Americans’ relationships to religion and violence. First, he shows us that many American Christians, Jews, spiritualists, and others did not lose their religion in the fires of World War I. Rather, they found new ways of making sense of faith in light of war. Some

threw their energies wholeheartedly behind a narrative of holy war, aided by propaganda images of crucified Allied soldiers and a demonic Kaiser Wilhelm. Jenkins reminds us that this propaganda was successful precisely because it exploited existing ideas of “cosmic confrontation,” of a final battle between good and evil (p. 111). Others found new ways to cope with death and destruction, pouring their energies into spiritualist and mystical religious practices. Religion changed, but it was not abandoned. What did change for many Christians was their confidence in Christendom as a model for right religion and politics. As European and American Christians made sense of the horrors of the war and the shifting borders of the Christian world, they also “had to abandon the traditional thought world of Christendom to return to their own resources, spiritual and intellectual” (p. 23). Neo-orthodoxy, Pentecostalism, and millennialism flourished in the war’s wake, as American and European Christians searched for new ways of understanding church and state and African and Asian peoples embraced the liberating and anti-colonial potential of indigenous expressions of Christianity.

Second, Jenkins demonstrates that American Christians were not alone in viewing the First World War as a holy war. All the Christian-majority nations involved depicted their cause as the cause of Christ. But Muslim nations also saw the war as a momentous religious event that brought an end to Christian-Muslim coexistence in places like the Ottoman Empire, Greece, and Syria, and resulted in the collapse of the last earthly caliphate.

(Jenkins writes before ISIS launched its horrifically violent quest to reestablish a caliphate, but readers will no doubt make the connection.) Jews also experienced the war in profoundly religious ways. In the U.S. and Europe, Jews' hopes of combating anti-Semitism through patriotic service were dashed, and mystical and Zionist expressions of Judaism experienced resurgence. Jenkins's analysis encourages American Christians to better understand the world-shifting consequences of war rhetoric.

THE RELIGION OF SOLDIERS AND WAR WORKERS

Jonathan Ebel's *Faith in the Fight: Religion and the American Soldier in the Great War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010, 272 pp., \$22.95) examines the First World War through a more intimate look at how American soldiers and other war workers invoked religion to make sense of the conflict. Whereas nations often use government propaganda to construct a unified war narrative, Ebel demonstrates that the religious experiences of everyday people were far more idiosyncratic, incorporating culturally mediated understandings of "faith, citizenship, and manhood" (p. 2). Soldiers' and war workers' experiences often confirmed their assumptions that right religion was expressed through struggle, suffering, and action, including violent action. Some soldiers saw the war as a means of personal redemption through brave and selfless national service. Others believed that their service would repair U.S. society, redeeming it from racism, sexism, and ethnocentricity, or from the dangers of diversity and pluralism.

But the war also confounded soldiers' progressive interpretations by upending all expectations of order or reason. As they repeatedly witnessed seemingly senseless deaths of friends and comrades juxtaposed to near misses and miraculous survivals, many soldiers developed a fatalistic streak. For non-religious soldiers, a capricious, personified fate served as a kind of deity, while religious soldiers often appealed to divine providence. Frequently, soldiers held these two notions—the cold workings of fate and the mysterious workings of God—in tension. But whether soldiers referred to these forces as "God, Fate, chance, [or] luck," the war "gave [soldiers] a taste of the radical subordination of individuals to higher powers," which complicated appeals to muscular Christianity (p. 63).

While the previous texts focus largely on how Americans have marshaled religious language to justify war, Ebel reminds us that the rhetoric of political and religious leaders does not necessarily represent the experiences of everyday people. Nevertheless, most of the people Ebel depicts remained relatively confident in the war's essential rightness. Even within the varied stories of soldiers and war workers, there was a broad consensus that America was right to enter the war, and that soldiers were right to fight and die in it. Many Americans saw soldiers' deaths as salvific in and of themselves, irrespective of any prior religious faith (p. 97). While "the Great War was not a war of religion," religion made Americans' involvement possible (p. 194).

It provided soldiers with ways of coping with senseless violence, language and symbols to make sense of death and suffering, and, perhaps most importantly, a model of masculine Christianity that made soldiering a noble and Christian calling.

CONCLUSION: HUMILITY, MERCY, AND JUSTICE

Not all American Christians have supported wars wholeheartedly or uncritically. Yet the ease with which Christians have entered into state-sanctioned and extra-institutional violent conflict should give us pause. These books serve as a call to theological humility: we must recognize that despite our sincere efforts to fight for just causes, we have a difficult time separating nationalist aims and self-righteous crusades from genuine justice. Whether we are advocates of total pacifism, just war, or something in between, we must keep in mind that all killing results in the destruction of people created in God's image. Our jeremiads and jihads typically result in something less than God's justice, and certainly less than God's mercy. Reckoning with America's martial past, and the ways in which Christianity has made this past possible, can help us be better stewards of our theological visions, political voices, and responsibilities toward both those we ask to go to war and those we label as our enemies.



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