*World War One and Faiths – Then and Now*
*Sunday 16th November 2014*
*Friends Meeting House, Norwich*

# The First World War
# A Multifaith Conflict

**Chris Wood**
Chair
Norwich InterFaith Link

## Why Did it Happen?

World War One was sparked off by long-standing local tensions, but was the result of empires expanding and contracting. The governments of Europe expected war, but did not understand the deadly consequences of mechanised conflict. This was 'total war' and it came as a shock to Europeans who had largely become detached from warfare since the days of Napoleon.

Two particular factors influenced Germany's militarization. One was the fact that, since the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1, Germany and France could not talk to one another without rattling sabres. The other was that Germany felt hemmed in by the other European superpowers and, along with Italy, saw empires like those of Britain, France and Russia as its natural right. Those imperial powers felt threatened, but did nothing politically to suggest to Germany that there was another option, as they would not have wanted to admit it themselves. Britain's economy had become dependent on its empire, not that the average worker here felt the benefit, which is why the period before the First World War was marked by campaigns for better social and employment conditions – causes that were set back rather than accelerated by the war and the subsequent economic hardships.

Yet the age of national empires was in decline. There would be a further phase of superpower empires – those of the USA and USSR – but the world was changing. Globalisation was advancing. Indeed, German industry and commerce was developing an international trade network of its own, a network that saw no advantages to war (except for the armaments industry), and indeed was severely damaged by it. Had Germany been the victor in Western Europe, the economic result may well have been a Prussian Customs Union writ large. Parallels have been drawn between that prospect and today's European Union. The big difference is that the EU is not really competing against rival economic empires or federations, but trying to survive in a world economy where money has been allowed to rewrite the rules. Today's empires are not geopolitical blocs, they are corporate octopuses, with intertwined financial tentacles enmeshing the world.

In the Balkans by contrast, the situation in 1914 was more complicated than that in the West, but the region was essentially pulled between three decaying empires: Austria-Hungary to the

North, Russia to the North-East, and the Turkish Ottoman Empire to the South-East. The first two of these were themselves also involved in the machinations of wider Eurasian power politics. Into this tinder-box, on 28th June 1914, walked Gavrilo Princip and his comrades.

It is easy to use words like 'terrorist'. After all, what to one person is terrorism, to another is guerrilla warfare, resistance or a freedom fight. Indeed, the excuse the German occupying forces in Belgium used for many of their atrocities, was that there were civilian resistance fighters present. In the twisted rules of war, to their minds, you had to be part of a recognised military in order to resist. Can we really blame those who, in the words of Jackson Browne, "finally can't take any more, and they pick up a gun or a brick or a stone"? [1]

But, however you look at it, the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, and Sophie, Duchess of Hohenberg, was, to say the very least, unfortunate. The Archduke was perhaps the worst of the Austro-Hungarian imperial family to target, being less belligerent than the rest. It was also the excuse for Austria-Hungary to invade Serbia and Germany to invade Belgium *en route* to France.

The war aroused and still arouses diverse emotions, from hatred and fear, to sadness and grief, to celebratory jingoism, but also love. For me, three quotes stand out that focus the maelstrom:

*"Ils ne passeront pas"* ("They shall not pass")

General Robert Nivelle, 23rd June 1916, Verdun.

"I know now that patriotism is not enough. It is not enough to love one's own people: one must love all men, and hate none."

Edith Cavell, 11th October 1915. [2]

"We shall have to fight another war all over again in 25 years."

Prime Minister David Lloyd George, 1919, Versailles

## Religion and Faith in the First World War

Religion was integral to the conflicts of World War One. The tensions in the Balkans were coloured by religious adherence and religion was used for secular, geopolitical ends. Back in 1895, Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany exhorted Russia to help fight a supposed "yellow peril" in order to "keep Europe Christian", a threat ostensibly demonstrated by the Chinese 'Boxer' rebellion, suppressed by the European powers in 1900. In 1914, he was happy to urge Muslims in the Ottoman Empire and India to *jihad* against Britain. For Turkey's part, it was easy to portray Armenian Christians as the 'other', allowing their massacre, but the real purpose was to remove a population which might side with Russia rather than the Empire. At the same time, Islamicists were kept out of power.

People of many races and faiths were affected by the war, whether as combatants or non-combatants. Even on the Western Front there were African and Indian soldiers. After the war, when a permanent memorial was planned for Whitehall, Sir Edwin Lutyens' Cenotaph

deliberately avoided any reference to Christianity or any other specific religion, as those that died were of diverse faiths. [3] This was the world's first truly global conflict – or rather set of conflicts, as the European conflagration touched and fuelled war in other theatres, particularly South-East Asia and Africa.

People were affected by the war in many ways. Non-combatants could still be civilian casualties (of warfare, pogroms or 'ethnic cleansing'), become forced labour, be made refugees, suffer economic hardship, lose homes, livelihoods, loved ones, cultural heritage and cherished landscapes, or succumb to disease, particularly so-called Spanish Flu after the war. Whether or not they themselves fought, the faiths and beliefs of those affected by the war read like a check-list of world religions.

- Christians, of all denominations
- Jews
- Muslims
- Baha'is
- Sikhs
- Zoroastrians
- Hindus
- Buddhists
- Jains
- Chinese traditions
- Indigenous traditions of Africa, South-East Asia, Australasia, Oceania, Japan (Shinto) and North America
- Theosophists and even a few Pagans. [4]

To the list should be added non-religious belief systems, especially perhaps Humanism and Revolutionary Communism, the latter being particularly important in what became the Soviet Union.

## Religion and War

Most of these religions favour the avoidance of conflict, foster goodwill between people, and oppose killing. However, many (though not all) of them actually have a contradictory concept of a just war, even if interpretations vary. This is not surprising, as there are two sides to religion, which generally overlap: 1) the spiritual connection to and striving towards something beyond mundane experience, whether Nirvana, God, the gods, the Universe, Ancestors or the land, and 2) organised religion. Whilst the second of these provides a gateway to the first, in terms of the development of human societies, it probably evolved to promulgate those societies' values, which usually included distancing themselves from other societies. [5] War gods are found in most polytheistic pantheons.

The tension between the spiritual and mundane sides of religion is most confused in the realm of morality. How do you equate "Thou shalt not kill", or love for all of creation, with "God is on our side"? Perhaps Wicca has the best code: "As long as it harms none, do what you will". Of course, we cannot live our lives without harming something, even if that is vegetable foods and fibre-plants, or the bacteria and viruses that our bodies constantly fend off. However, rather than being nonsense, this is a call thoroughly to think through the consequences of our actions.

But, how was the moral conflict balanced for people 'of faith' a hundred years ago? What made people with strong religious beliefs fight? Even in British Non-Conformist Christianity, with its strong anti-war polemic, only the Quakers and Unitarians had significant numbers of Conscientious Objectors during the First World War. [6]

**1 Conscription**
To start with, many people in many countries had no choice; they were conscripted. The next speaker will discuss Conscientious Objection, but whilst the legal and popular sanctions against Britons who refused to fight were severe, the situation was worse elsewhere. Similarly, those at the front line who challenged orders to undertake suicidal attacks or atrocities against the enemy were often summarily murdered, the worst cases probably being in the Italian army. The famous 1914 Christmas Truce on the Western Front never happened again, not because of renewed hatred, but because on both sides officers were ordered to execute those who fraternised with the enemy. After all, one could not have the great war effort, on which so much political posturing was built, undermined by people recognising their common humanity and refusing to kill each other, could one?

**2 Duty**
Established religions tend to inculcate a sense of duty. Again there are two sides to this. On the one hand, duty to one's fellow human beings and to society generally aid social cohesion, as well as helping those in need. On the other hand, there is often a duty to those in authority. Kaiser Wilhelm II's continued belief in the Divine Right of Kings may have been anachronistic a hundred years ago, but even in today's democratic Britain, there are people who still feel a moral duty to 'one's betters' and defer automatically to authority.

**3 Defence of Homeland, Loved Ones and Small Nations**
It is natural to want to defend oneself, one's friends, family and loved ones, and the place in which one was born and in which one lives. There may be non-violent ways of doing that, and were those more readily explored, without going so far as appeasement, we could probably avoid much conflict.

An extension of this defence is coming to the aid of those against whom aggression is directed. Even the peacekeeping role of the United Nations employs the military. In the First World War, for Britain's part, this would have been a major justification for involvement, given the invasion of Belgium by Germany and, particularly, Britain's commitment to defend the country. However, Belgium was not the reason Britain went to war in 1914. The main reason was the defence of its dominance of the sea and trade thereon, and thereby defence of Empire. Britain's involvement was based on economics, not humanitarianism.

There is a widespread and automatic assumption that the armed services are defending our country. When they defend us against attack, that may be true. When they fight wars in far off lands to serve economic interests, the best that can be said is that they are defending our way of life. Whether that way of life is itself defensible is another matter. In 1914, our way of life was based on the exploitation of Empire; today it is based on an even more unsustainable oligopoly of international capitalism.

**4 Fear of the Other**
Religions play their part in maintaining the distinctions between people, especially when they indoctrinate their adherents into the belief that they are the one true way. The press has taken on some of this role, sensationalising and generalising, painting entire faiths as evil: until

recently it was Witchcraft and Paganism, now it is Islam that is the target. The media has taken on the mantle from established religion.

This fear goes back to the origins of organised religion with our hunter-gatherer ancestors. There is *some* evolutionary logic to it, in that if someone adopts a radically different way of life in an inhospitable environment, it could *in extremis* threaten the whole group, but we have failed to grow out of this element of our social adolescence.

Here in Norwich in 1144, the death of a twelve-year-old boy by the name of William was blamed on the local Jewish community, one of many such slurs around the country. It was part of an increasing anti-semitism that resulted in mass-murder in Norwich in 1190, and the expulsion of professing Jews from England a hundred years later, in 1290.

In 1209, Simon de Montford's Crusader army attacked the town of Bézier, in the Languedoc, following papal orders, and slaughtered the population. They were hunting adherents of the Cathar sect and were quite prepared to kill Catholics as well. It is where the quote "Kill them all, God will know His own" is supposed to have been uttered.

As already mentioned, in 1895, Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany exhorted Russia to help fight a supposed "yellow peril" in order to "keep Europe Christian", yet in 1914 he was also keen to present himself as a friend to Islam, at least in as much as he could sow division and incite hatred towards Britain.

We in Britain sometimes have a simplistic view of religion in relation to World War One. Our focus is largely on the Western Front, where the commonest religion on both sides was Christianity. Yet elsewhere, in Eastern Europe in particular, the situation was more complicated and nastier. Also fighting on both sides were people of the Jewish faith and it is important to remember that, contrary to the situation in World War Two, the Jews were in a far better position in Germany than elsewhere, particularly Russia. In Eastern Europe, World War One was characterised by pogroms against and official 'ethnic cleansing' of, variously, Jews, Muslims and Christians, or Serbs, Greeks and Armenians.

**5 Martial Traditions**

Related to this fear of the other, there has always been a martial or warrior tradition within or endorsed by most organised religions. Far from being something that died out with the advent of civilization, it is there in modern world faiths, from Christian church parades to Japanese state Shinto. However, this war was different, a factor brought home by the recent exhibition, *The Sikhs and the First World War*, at London's Brunei Gallery. [7] Sikhs made up a fifth of the British Indian Army at the start of the war (but they were only 1% of the population of the sub-continent). Young Sikh men were encouraged to join up by older women, expecting the conflict to be over quickly and gloriously, mirroring the martial traditions of the former Sikh Empire. The young women were more likely to want their husbands and brothers to stay, fearing the worst. As it turned out, the war was protracted and loss of life higher than expected. Perhaps there was greater wisdom in youth on that occasion.

**6 Cognitive Dissonance**

For many British men, going to war meant greater freedom than staying at home, as long as you ignored the fighting. The discipline of military life was no worse than that of agricultural labour or factory work, and not necessarily more dangerous. It was probably as dangerous on

a daily basis for those women at home, who worked in munitions factories, as it was for men at the front.

This freedom is one reason why many veterans looked back fondly to their time in the war; they were taken away from all the restrictions of home life and given a whole new set of friends with whom to expand their horizons. Put aside the risk of being killed or maimed, easily done until it happens to you or to those around you, and the fact that you are there to kill and maim other people, easily done if the enemy is demonized, and you can treat the whole thing as a holiday.

## A Perspective on the Aftermath and Legacy of War

Coming from my own, Pagan perspective, I cannot claim to be a pacifist. I would like to be and I admire those who can make that claim, but I would be prepared to resist attack or invasion. Furthermore, peace is not possible without justice and that requires people to stand up and say 'no'; sometimes that is not without violence, however undesirable.

Norwich has its own example of this, in Kett's Rebellion of 1549. A popular call for justice turned violent, largely because of the attitude of the royal herald, and resulted in over 3000 deaths. But it did also effectively force the tentative beginnings of national poor relief. [8]

There is no such thing as a just war: sometimes justified, but never just. It is always an evil thing, but sometimes, rarely, it is the lesser of two evils. Was World War One justified? For the Central Powers? No. For Britain? Maybe, in as much as it was in defence of Belgium. In as much as it was in defence of Empire, no.

I return to the three quotes from before:

- "They shall not pass";
- "I know now that patriotism is not enough. It is not enough to love one's own people: one must love all men, and hate none."
- "We shall have to fight another war all over again in 25 years."

Lloyd George was being optimistic. War came again just 20 years later. And the Second World War was in so many ways a result of the first. The nationalistic tensions in the heart of Europe remained unresolved; the world economy was plunged into recession as a result of war expenditure and destruction; and the shock of industrialised total war produced a new, nihilistic, unfeeling modernism. All of these contributed to the rise of totalitarianism.

This perhaps made another war inevitable and there was certainly greater justification for the involvement of the Allied Nations in containing totalitarianism, even if one of those was itself a totalitarian empire. But had there not been a First World War, would there have been a Nazi Reich? Perhaps by fighting the First World War we ensured that there would be a second. We did not have the vision, in 1919, to see beyond the hatred and recriminations, and find a way of moving beyond war as a tool of international politics.

And it is not just the Second World War that can be traced to the first. That other totalitarian empire, the Soviet Union, an ally when convenient, became the bogey man afterwards. The Cold War lasted nearly half a century and then the collapse of the Soviet bloc allowed old

enmities to resurface. There are worrying parallels between the activities of the Russian Federation today and those of Germany before the First World War.

Furthermore, the lines drawn in the Middle East after World War One, to the benefit of European powers, left a legacy of nationalistic and imperial tensions that have festered ever since.

Whether, collectively, we could have had the necessary vision in 1919 is a moot point. A hundred years on, there is no excuse. The two World Wars – or indeed 'The War of the World', as Niall Ferguson describes the period between the start of the Russo-Japanese war in 1904 and the partitioning of Korea in 1953 – marked a turning point in human history. Previously, the human race was able to behave selfishly without irreversible damage to its future prospects. However bad the injustice, inhumanity and environmental degradation, the effects were localized and we could move on to another place, another resource, another new frontier. We could plunder unashamedly and the world would carry on, for those fortunate enough to be in the ruling elite at any rate. We could react to resistance by waging war.

These are not luxuries we can afford any longer. There are too many of us and too few new frontiers. We are overloading the Earth's natural resources and capacity to adapt. The issues that used to be regional are now global. Everything is inter-linked. That is nothing new – all of life has always been linked together – but recognition of this fact is now critical to our survival as a civilized species.

Sadly, that recognition is slow to dawn. Instead of holding back the devastating climatic changes we have engendered, we choose to wage war to ensure supplies of fossil oil, and claim it is humanitarianism. We invest power in global corporations and take it from the hands of people trying to earn a living from the soil. We spend scarce resources on machines to deal death, on fast travel for the well-off, on bio-technology to keep profits in the West, but it seems we can't afford healthy food, decent healthcare, meaningful education and personal self-fulfilment – even in this country, let alone for the majority of the world's population.

## The Consequences of Our Actions and Our Assumptions

Everything is linked on a spiritual as well as a mundane level. We each add our threads as the destiny of humanity is woven. We must weave with care, for seemingly small variations can alter the entire cloth, there are so many of us involved. If the pattern becomes too chaotic, the cloth may be unwoven and the threads dispersed.

An example of such lack of care can be seen in the language we use, in relation to the current situation in the Middle East, promulgated unthinkingly by our news media. There is in fact no such organisation as 'ISIS'. The actual Arabic name is *al-Dawlah al-Islāmīyah fī al-Irāq wa-al-Shām*, which translates as 'Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant'. [9] The 'S' used in 'ISIS' comes from *al- Shām*, actually an area much larger than Syria. The organisation now, in any case, goes by the simpler name of Islamic State. Far from being a pedantic concern for accuracy in translation, this is an issue of inter-faith concern, as Isis is the name of the Great Goddess of the Eastern Mediterranean and the use of the name for an organisation specialising in terror and fundamentalism causes a great deal of bad feeling amongst Her modern-day devotees. As an analogy, if the organisation were called something like the 'Jihadist Empire of Syria Under Sharia', would we be so free with the acronym?

This is a microcosm of a wider issue: a widespread assumption that Britain and Europe are essentially Christian. An assumption of European Christianity (formally, if not at heart) led to the Kaiser calling for suppression of the Boxer Rebellion in 1900. The rebellion was a reaction against Western imperialism, which brought Christianity with it, and was indeed barbaric, but whether more so than the German invasion of Belgium 14 years later is a matter for debate.

Similarly, there was popular disquiet at the absence of Christian religious references on the Whitehall Cenotaph. Still today there is a widespread assumption that Britain, if it has to acknowledge this superstitious thing called religion at all, is basically Christian, despite the fact that Western culture owes as much to pre-Christian, pagan influences as Christian, that much of its architectural splendour was financed by Jews, and that much of its wisdom and scholarship was transmitted to the Renaissance through Islam, to say nothing of the influence of more recent and more exotic cultural streams.

## Last Thoughts: A Commonwealth of Faiths?

Whatever the rights and wrongs of the British Empire, involvement in World War One brought a new sense of common purpose to British colonies. The Empire was in terminal decline, but it would be replaced by a Commonwealth of nations.

It was to the credit of the British Government in 1920 that Sir Edwin Lutyens' permanent Cenotaph was not required to refer to any specific faith, as the dead were of many faiths. Today we live in a still more multicultural society, but one in which religion itself is challenged by fundamentalist materialism. The 'one true way' approach is no longer tenable. Every route to the Divine is valid and the enlightened approach surely is to help the seeker to find the right path for them.

If the challenge of scientific materialism has done one good thing for religion and community cohesion, it is that it allows us to see our sacred truths as true in a different way to scientific truth – which means that other people's sacred truths can also be true at the same time.

Perhaps the new religions of the State are money and scientific materialism (an unholy combination, perhaps). If so, that at least allows *us* the freedom to celebrate the diversity of our religious traditions and take common cause with one another, without secular power supporting one or other fundamentalism.

Whether we can set aside confessional differences to forge a 'Commonwealth of Faiths' and so make a difference on the world stage, or whether we are doomed to see yet more sectarian warfare, I will leave to later discussion.

## Notes

1 Jackson Browne (1986) *Lives in the Balance*, from the album of the same name, Elektra/Asylum/WEA 7559-60457-2.

2 There are other versions of this quotation; this one comes from Katie Pickles' book *Transnational Outrage: The Death and Commemoration of Edith Cavell*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 40. She is citing the account of Rev. H. Stirling Gahan from the archives at the Imperial War Museum.

3 See Andrew Crompton (1997) The Secret of the Cenotaph, *AA Files* 34, pp. 64-67 (the journal of the Architectural Association School of Architecture); available in updated form from http://www.cromp.com (accessed 23rd November 2014).

4 Whilst the flowering of modern Paganism occurred after the Second World War, there were people following consciously Pagan paths even in the late 19th century, for instance many members of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Like Theosophists at the time, most would have practised dual observance and expressed their religion publicly as (generally) Christian.

5 See Nicholas Wade (2009) *The Faith Instinct: How Religion Evolved and Why it Endures*, Penguin.

6 Wilkinson, *Dissent or Conform* (below).

7 See http://www.empirefaithwar.com/exhibition (accessed 23rd November 2014).

8 After the Rebellion, a compulsory Poor Rate had been established in Norwich to calm tensions, following the example of one in London in 1547. When Catholic sympathisers staged a revolt in 1570, the Mayor, John Aldrich, rapidly established a new Poor Rate to pay for institutional poor relief in a direct challenge to what was perceived as indiscriminate 'popish' almsgiving, and to reduce the perceived threat that the revolt would gain momentum by attracting the support of the many vagrants that were perceived as coming to Norwich as an easy place to get hand-outs (in popular politics *plus ça change*…). The political success of this measure led, just two years later, to its architect being given the opportunity to make the Norwich system the model for the first national Poor Law, at the instigation of the Archbishop of Canterbury – Norwich-born Matthew Parker, who had preached (against rebellion) in Kett's camp in 1549. See Matthew Reynolds (2005) *Godly Reformers and their Opponents in Early Modern England: Religion in Norwich c. 1560-1643*, Boydell.

9 See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islamic_State_of_Iraq_and_the_Levant (accessed 23rd November 2014) as a starting point.

## General Sources and Further Reading


- Cowles, Virginia (1963) *The Kaiser*, Collins.
- Ferguson, Niall (2006) *The War of the World: Twentieth-Century Conflict and the Descent of the West*, Penguin.
- Ferguson, Niall (1998) *The Pity of War*, Allen Lane / Penguin.
- Kramer, Alan (2007) *Dynamic of Destruction: Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War*, Oxford University Press.
- Strachan, Hew (2014) *The First World War: A New History*, Simon & Schuster.
- Wilkinson, Alan (1986) *Dissent or Conform: War, Peace and the English Churches 1900-1945*, SCM Press.
- Willmott, H.P. (2014) *World War 1*, second edition, Dorling Kindersley.