

## Introduction

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BETWEEN AUGUST 2, 1914 and November 11, 1918, European powers waged a war of then unprecedented scale and lethality. Soldiers from the warring nations and their proxies battled each other on three continents, across vast expanses of ocean, and, thanks to technological advances of the preceding decade, in the skies as well. An assassination in Sarajevo started the war. The failure of a tightly choreographed German plan to disable the French military and the subsequent entrenchment of hostile armies along a jagged line stretching from the North Sea south to the Swiss Alps produced the war's Western Front. The involvement of modernizing societies and their stunning capacities to produce and destroy combined with military leaders' equally stunning unwillingness or inability to adjust antiquated tactics to the industrialized violence gave the war its body count: an appalling 8 million dead among the combatants. This was the Great War.

The United States came late to the war, though U.S. citizens were involved in the fighting from the beginning. President Woodrow Wilson waited two years and eight months to ask Congress for a declaration of war against Germany, and he did so with scant capacity to back up the declaration. In 1917, the United States military could claim approximately 200,000 professional soldiers in the regular army and the National Guard combined, and a shipping capacity insufficient to transport a substantial fighting force to France.<sup>1</sup> These facts struck little fear in the hearts of German leaders and inspired little more confidence in America's erstwhile allies. But between April 6, 1917 and November 11, 1918, the United States mobilized four million young men for war service. Two million of these newly minted citizen soldiers and tens of thousands of male and female support service volunteers crossed the Atlantic to fight alongside the French and English. They fought and died in places whose names they believed would be etched forever in American memory: Chateau-Thierry, Belleau Wood, Cantigny, St. Mihiel, Fismes, the Argonne Forest.

This is a study of the faith of these American soldiers and war workers as they prepared for and fought the Great War. It is an attempt to describe a moment in America's religious history when cultural and religious currents, fueled by concerns about the nation's future, gave rise to a military impulse suffused with, and framed by, Christianity. Following this impulse, Americans served and fought and died. This book argues that as

## 2 • Introduction

they did all three, they believed—believed in the righteousness of the cause, believed in the communal and personal value of their errand, believed that in answering the call to arms they were answering the call of their faith. Experiences of the Great War altered but did not undermine these beliefs. After the war, American soldiers and war workers responded to the peculiar mix of suffering, death, triumph, and disappointment by struggling at home, sometimes violently, for their visions of America. Having vanquished the “Hun” in Europe, they brought the struggle against a hydra-headed “evil” to American soil. The title of this book, *Faith in the Fight*, thus reflects its subject—the religious beliefs and reflections of American soldiers and war workers in the Great War—and an important aspect of those beliefs and reflections, namely the connection between war and redemption.

The men and women who helped fight the Great War were products of a society whose cultural and religious landscape was shaped by a particular understanding of faith, citizenship, and manhood in which all three converged in the realm of strenuous action. Struggle, strain, and sacrifice demonstrated and enhanced physical and spiritual vigor, vitalized American culture, and gave life to the American nation. Calls for, and praise of, action and initiative issued forth from the pages of the *Catholic World* and the mouth and pen of Theodore Roosevelt; liberal theologians and divines touted “progress”; American editorial and sports pages valorized “effort.” Billy Sunday seldom held a revival without encouraging Christians to put up their fists and fight for God. “Initiative is the spirit of the explorer and the pioneer, especially in spreading God’s faith and His Church,” wrote Walter Elliott, C.S.P. in the June 1912 issue of the *Catholic World*. His article, “The Might of the Inward Man,” called men of initiative to “covet and ask the place of toil and danger in dealing with God’s enemies.”

Initiative is that spirit which makes little of one’s own deficiencies when duty or opportunity calls for action; and constantly [strives] to make opportunity stand for duty. To have an adventurous spirit in religious undertakings. To be the first to advance when authority says, “Go!” and the first (however sadly) to stop when authority says “Halt!”<sup>2</sup>

The properly religious man was a man of action, willing to welcome danger and sacrifice, and happy to deal harshly with “God’s enemies.” Such language could and did encourage *spiritual* warfare. “Religious undertakings” could be understood as evangelism or catechesis. Yet when the authority calling “Go” and “Halt” wore olive drab rather than vestments, the words stayed the same, the connection among duty, faith, and action remained intact, but the effect became deadly. The religious

culture of pre-war America gave Americans ideas, images, and beliefs perfectly tailored to war.

I began research for this book hoping to find an unequivocal soldierly critique of the mythic religious framing of war, hoping to find that soldiers were troubled by the coming together of faith and violence, perhaps deepened in their resolve to be less violent, and more and differently faithful. After reading the deeply ambivalent letters of Vinton Dearing, the son of Baptist missionaries and a first lieutenant in the Twenty-eighth Division, I thought that this project would describe a more widespread sense among American soldiers of the Great War that the wheels had come off of “Christian” civilization; that, as Dearing poignantly wrote, things had gone so horribly wrong on earth that heaven itself was confused. But in most cases, realizations of war’s horrors occurred within a widely held, compelling, eventually blood-soaked framework of meaning. Where soldiers’ experiences challenged the framework, those experiences had to contend with a powerful religio-cultural impulse to see in war and the warrior’s experiences the affirmation and strengthening of pre-war faiths. American soldiers of the Great War were more frequently soldiers of those pre-war faiths than they were revolutionaries against them.

#### THE GREAT WAR AND RELIGION IN AMERICAN HISTORY

Studies of America’s wars tend to ignore religion. Studies of American religion tend to ignore war. In the former historiography, one finds the occasional mention of a chaplain or the obligatory reference to atheists and foxholes; in the latter—with a few notable exceptions—wars stand less as events formative of American religion and more as historical markers. When historians of religion in the United States have discussed the Great War—William Hutchison, George Marsden, Grant Wacker, and Diane Winston are the most prominent—they have written mainly about clerical rhetoric, denominational responses, and theological aftermaths.<sup>3</sup> This book is an attempt to integrate these historiographies and to demonstrate that by studying “faith in the fight” we gain a deeper appreciation of the relationship between religion, violence, and citizenship as experienced by ordinary men and women. I proceed in the belief that there is something to be learned by working through the religiousness of war from the inside out, as it were—that by studying the religious thoughts and lives of soldiers and war workers, we can make more intelligible both general phenomena, such as the appeal of war and memories of war, and more specific religious and political events and movements in twentieth-century America.

## 4 • Introduction

The last three decades have seen the publication of a rich, if not voluminous, historiography of the Great War as an American experience, with little discussion of the religious dimensions of that experience.<sup>4</sup> Religion lives at the outer edges of work on the Great War even as major works on the culture of the early twentieth century describe religion as central. Henry May, T. J. Jackson Lears, E. Anthony Rotundo, Gail Bederman, Clifford Putney, Milton Sernett, and Wallace Best have described eloquently the roles churches, religious leaders, and religious ideas played in shaping cultural currents and perceptions of race, gender, politics, and economy. Religion and religious institutions were at work both on the “official surface”—described by Henry May as “almost intolerable” for its “placidity and complacency”—and beneath it. Men and women of faith defended social norms and fueled their transgression, justified economic gains and framed protests against economic exploitation, cultivated notions of American exceptionalism and challenged Americans to think differently about history, race, gender, and meaning.<sup>5</sup> Religion was also the source of resistance to, and support for, violence and war.

Mainstream American Protestantism in the early years of the twentieth century was dominated by, but not coterminous with, an optimistic liberalism.<sup>6</sup> Some versions of the “massive and varied movement” known as liberal or social Christianity allowed for a coziness with the instruments of perceived progress that bordered on unequivocal support of the wealthy and powerful. Other versions, particularly that articulated by Social Gospel activist and theologian Walter Rauschenbusch, bordered on revolutionary. Across this range of understandings regarding the paths to and mechanisms of progress, America’s leading Protestants shared the belief in the possibility of earthly progress toward the kingdom of God. Historians of the period have, however, detected a gap between the optimistic, “evasive banality” of “flaccid” Protestantism and the religious and psychological needs of men and women facing the realities of industrial urban America. They have noted a widespread desire for more “authentic” modes of religious and literary expression than those that suffused late-Victorian America.<sup>7</sup> T. J. Lears has argued that late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century existence, uncoupled from profound demanding structures of meaning, led young men and women of the urban upper and upper-middle classes to feel “weightless”—adrift in a mediated meaningless world—and to seek answers more profound and experiences more immediate. Few in America’s Protestant mainstream could speak to these concerns, so men and women turned toward practices and institutions less “tainted” by modernity and accommodation. This discontent with self-described “modern” Christianity, often associated with cosmopolitan elites, was also evident in the Protestant Fundamentalist and Pentecostal movements. Both movements gathered momentum in the decade prior to

the Great War by offering religious answers that denied the progressive nature of history and rejected attempts to mold Christian teaching to the knowledge and concerns of “the age.”<sup>8</sup>

During the first decades of the twentieth century, American Catholicism was also grappling with a shifting identity brought on by a massive influx of Catholic immigrants, the miserable conditions in which many of its urban faithful worked, and by its 1908 designation as a “national” church despite a lack of national unity.<sup>9</sup> Catholic leaders worked to find their social and political voices while simultaneously trying to unify a church that was divided internally by barriers of language and culture. During the Catholic modernist/Americanist controversy of 1890–1907, liberal Catholic bishops and clergy in America found themselves accused by more conservative American Catholics and, in turn, by the Vatican of adapting Catholic teaching and polity to American democratic norms and ecumenical impulses. Concern led to action in 1899 when the Pope condemned “Americanist” teachings in *Testem Benevolentiae*, and again in 1907 when *Pascendi Domenici Gregis* mandated an end to ecumenical exchanges among seminaries and pulled the plug on the liberal *New York Review*, a theological journal to which Francis P. Duffy, chaplain of the Fighting Sixty-ninth, New York’s famous National Guard unit, was a frequent contributor.<sup>10</sup> Pushed to assimilate by a frequently hostile culture and pulled by a hierarchy troubled by the theological implications of assimilation and ecumenism, Catholic Americans found few easy answers as to how to live their faith in the United States.

The two major African American thinkers of the early twentieth century, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois were not centrally concerned with religion, but recognized its vital importance to the African American communities they studied. When they and their disciples pondered the African American situation, they invoked religious themes and acknowledged the role religious institutions would play in the up-lift of the race. Historian Milton Sernett recently demonstrated how powerfully religious ideas and images shaped black perceptions of the Great Migration, which began in 1915 partially in response to war-time labor shortages. As Sernett and Wallace Best note, black churches, continuing to serve as “undifferentiated” institutions in African American communities, both acted and were acted upon in this massive movement toward “the Promised Land.”<sup>11</sup>

Religion was, without question, a powerful force in many corners of early-twentieth-century America. It was at the heart of Pentecostal critiques of nations and wars and African American resistance to racism and Jim Crow; religion drove acrimonious debates between theological liberals and conservative proto-Fundamentalists, and was a marker of cultural otherness between recent immigrants, many of whom were Cath-

## 6 • Introduction

olic or Jewish, and a deeply entrenched Protestant establishment. Religion also shaped, and was shaped by, understandings of and concerns about gender, race, and the future of the nation.

### “AMERICAN MANHOOD” AND RELIGION IN CRISIS

The religious turmoil that marked the Progressive Era frequently intersected with a “crisis” in understandings of gender ideals, particularly a reconsideration of “ideal” manhood. An increasingly industrial, urban, and prosperous America often required young men and women to live lives largely devoid of physical exertion. The work of a clerk or mid-level manager called for different skills and different bodies from the work of the farmer, fisher, or tradesman.<sup>12</sup> Rather than treat this perceived change in levels of fitness and vigor as an inevitable consequence of social and economic changes, politicians, physicians, scholars, and clergymen repeatedly voiced concerns about the effeminacy and over-civilization of America’s middle- and upper-class men and saw the trend away from physical vigor as a threat to American (white) manhood and culture.

America’s late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century cultural custodians believed that the Anglo-Saxon race and its manhood were superior among European peoples, and that the American experience had improved the race. They told stories of Anglo-Saxon emergence from Germanic roots and the rise of Anglo-Saxon power in Europe and, finally, in England. The story continued with the colonization and “settlement” of America—a test that American Anglo-Saxon men passed by using “superior” intellect and a storied capacity for violence. Theodore Roosevelt argued that with a new American nation, a new American race had emerged—refined and developed through trial and conquest on the frontiers of America—and now stood apart from and above its English progenitor.<sup>13</sup> But the fact that a race could emerge, progress, and grow stronger, left open the possibility that it could also regress, weaken, and be surpassed. Roosevelt and others gave urgent voice to this concern as the lives of American men became less physically demanding. The impressive physicality and muscle-building manual labor of the “inferior races,” among them immigrants from South and Central Europe and African Americans migrating north, lent greater immediacy to the problem of racial decline.

Psychologist G. Stanley Hall was influential in formulating an antidote to American male degeneracy. Hall presupposed the intellectual and cultural superiority—indeed the civilizational adulthood—of American men. (The corollary was that “inferior” cultures and intellects were child-like or “adolescent” by comparison.) From this point, Hall argued that the fully realized, fully masculine man progressed through the stages of civili-

zation as he grew to adulthood, and that children ought to play, run, and fight with abandon in order to move to more advanced stages of intellectual development with physical capabilities in full flower. Those who skipped stages—who were discouraged from exercising their “savage” physicality—would pay later as attenuated, ineffectual, perhaps neurasthenic men. Societies that did not encourage boys to act out their primitive natures risked paying a much steeper price.<sup>14</sup> Influenced by Hall’s theories, educators, physicians, politicians, and ministers encouraged boys and young men to seek physical and spiritual betterment through exercise, strenuous outdoor experiences, and physical confrontation.<sup>15</sup>

In this masculinization effort, churches were both tools and targets. A startling shortage of men in American Protestant churches led many Protestant leaders to ask where the men had gone, why they had left, and how they might be brought back to active Christian practice. The answers, the churchmen concluded, were that effeminate sentimental religion had driven younger men away, and that drawing them back was a matter of re-establishing the masculinity of Christ and of the Christian life.<sup>16</sup> Accomplished theologians and clergymen such as Harry Emerson Fosdick, Henry Churchill King, Charles MacFarland, John R. Mott, William Adams Brown, Episcopal Bishop Charles Brent (who would become Chief of Chaplains in the American Expeditionary Force), and James I. Vance frequently exalted the masculine qualities of Christianity. Vance rallied masculine Christians—true Christians—against the embarrassingly effeminate clergyman with a scathing attack. “Where in all the sweep of freaks and failures, of mawkish sentiments and senseless blather, can there be found an object of deeper disgust than one of these thin, vapid, affected, driveling little doodles dressed up in men’s clothes, but without a thimbleful of brains in his pate or an ounce of manhood in his anatomy? He is worse than weak—he is a weaklet.”<sup>17</sup>

Just as contemporary notions of manhood emphasized aggressive, physical “masculinity,” the “masculinization” of Christianity tended to involve emphases on strenuous action, both social and physical.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Progressive-Era reconsiderations of who Christ had been, what his message was, and what both meant to American men emphasized, to use the title of R. Warren Conant’s 1915 treatise, *The Virility of Christ*. Taking Christ to have been a man of action, actively engaged in the issues of his world, Christian leaders and laity launched numerous movements that challenged American men to reclaim Christianity from sentimentalists and feminizers, and to live lives of Christian action. In some cases, this meant missionary work; in others, it meant aggressive engagement in social action; in still others, “Christian action” was understood as attention to the health and vitality of the male body.<sup>19</sup> Conant provided a passionate example of this convergence when writing of Christ’s virility.

## 8 • Introduction

The men of a strenuous age demand a strenuous Christ. If they fail to find him the Church is to blame. For Christ himself was strenuous enough to satisfy the most exacting; he was stalwart and fearless, aggressive and progressive; never flinching from a challenge, overwhelming in quickness and sharpness of attack; yet withal wary and wise, never “rattled,” always holding himself well in hand.<sup>20</sup>

This view of Christ as an active, often militant man, fed the early-twentieth-century growth of intra- and extra-ecclesial Christian organizations designed to attract and retain young men with a strenuous Christian faith.

By uniting faith and physical exertion and promising a stronger, more vital Christian manhood, muscular Christianity addressed the problem of “over-civilization” among urban, usually Anglo-Saxon, men and helped answer fears that “lower-class workers and muscular immigrants” might topple “middle- and upper-class managerial types.”<sup>21</sup> In his study of muscular Christianity, Clifford Putney argues that no group of organizations was “more important than the mainline Protestant churches” when it came to the physical and spiritual development of boys. “These were instrumental in the formation of boys’ boarding schools, out-door camping, and the Boys’ Brigade. In 1915 they also sponsored 80 percent of all Boy Scout troops, 90 percent of whose members claimed in 1921 to be attending Sunday school.”<sup>22</sup> The Boys’ Brigade, the Boy Scouts, the Knights of St. Andrew, the Knights of King Arthur, and the YMCA, each of which fused in some way religious institutions and physical activity, were all thriving in the decades prior to the Great War.

The exaltation of the warrior ideal and assent to its correlation between masculine aggressive action and purer, more profound living was woven tightly into the muscular Christianity movement and was a key dimension of the anti-modern antidote to a hyper-mediated weightless existence. It should then be no surprise that solutions to the churches’ “man problem,” and to perceived Christian effeminacy, often fused the masculine and the military.<sup>23</sup> For example, the Chicago-based Brotherhood of Saint Andrew, aimed at young men, defined itself by an almost seamless union of faith and military idiom. Putney writes that when a young man “arrived at St. James [Church in Chicago]” he was “greeted by a leader of the Brotherhood and directed to one of two aisles where the organization held pews. Each aisle had a ‘lieutenant,’ who in turn had under him several ‘privates,’ one or more to a pew. In addition, there was a ‘quartermaster,’ who kept Brotherhood pews supplied with hymn-books and invitation cards.”<sup>24</sup> The uniforms and activities of church-based and church-sponsored boys’ organizations accustomed a generation of boys to the mixture of religious and military culture.



The spread of muscular Christian organizations was wide, but the movement's cultural influence was wider. Though often described as an exclusively Protestant phenomenon, concerns for the masculinity of Christian faith were also present in American Catholicism. In pre-war and wartime writings, many Catholic soldiers and clergy went out of their way to note the compatibility of masculinity and Christian practice, and to foreground the qualities of service, duty, struggle, initiative, and toughness in depictions of the ideal Catholic man. Not all parishes sponsored the special hours and "express lanes" for "male only" confession and communion described by Gail Bederman, but it is clear that concerns for the gender of Christian practice and the virility of Christian men extended well beyond neurasthenic Northeasterners and the elite male boarding school crowd.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, though a lofty sense of the war's religious meaningfulness was robust and widespread among wealthy northeastern elites, there was no yawning chasm separating official, elite, and soldierly understandings of the war.<sup>26</sup> "[E]ven a modest sampling of the personal documents left behind reveals common responses to the shared enterprise, and common conventions of perception and language to which these men resorted in the effort to comprehend their experience and relate it to others."<sup>27</sup> In training and in war, young men of all faiths described desires for unmediated experience, the need to express their manhood violently, and tensions between "masculine" and "feminine" Christianities.<sup>28</sup>

Historians have forwarded related explanations for the ubiquity of this worldview and idiom, focusing primarily on wartime forces.<sup>29</sup> Some men and women were certainly brought their views of the war by the propaganda and "advertising" work of George A. Creel's Committee on Public Information and his Four-Minute Men. (Creel was charged by the Wilson administration with stimulating support for the war and encouraging the "accelerated Americanization" of immigrants. To accomplish this end, Creel employed 75,000 men to give four-minute patriotic speeches to any audience they could find.<sup>30</sup>) But a longer view shows the presence of a firm cultural and religious foundation upon which all kinds of voices—governmental, religious, literary, and personal—could build hopes for a romantic, redemptive war experience. Soldiers accepted and repeated official and elite pronouncements on the war—including the official but far from univocal *Stars and Stripes*—not because those pronouncements were forced upon them, but because they corresponded well to soldiers' pre-war worldviews, mythic imaginations, and religiously informed understandings of their task. When the call went forth for the young products of this culture to fight, many responded with enthusiasm. The Wilson administration was concerned that the nation's sons and daughters would struggle with the notion of a draft and might even resist, but beginning on June 5, 1917, roughly ten million men registered for service.<sup>31</sup>

## AMERICAN RELIGION AND THE GREAT WAR

The study of the Great War as a religious experience began during the war. As the nation mobilized in the spring of 1917, the leaders of the General War-Time Commission of the Churches—an off-shoot of the Federal Council of Churches of Christ—formed the Committee on the War and the Religious Outlook, whose task it was to survey the religious practices and beliefs of men entering the Army, study the effects of army life and the war on those attitudes and beliefs, and extract lessons for the Church.<sup>32</sup> Their report, *Religion Among American Men: As Revealed by a Study of Conditions in the Army*, published in 1919, is a rich primary source for reasons other than intended (it captures post-war concerns among Protestant leaders better than it captures soldiers' religious lives and thoughts) and a secondary source in need of revision. In the ninety years since the publication of *Religion Among American Men*, three additional works have focused on religious aspects of the Great War. Ray Abrams' *Preachers Present Arms: The Role of the American Churches and Clergy in the World War*, John F. Piper's *The American Churches in World War I*, and Richard M. Gamble's *The War for Righteousness: Progressive Christianity, the Great War, and the Rise of the Messianic Nation*. All three focus their attentions on the home front and the words and actions of religious leaders, but do not consider the thoughts of soldiers or home-front laity. Abrams' book, first published in 1933, is a polemic against the nationalistic faith that he believes consumed America's religious leaders during the war. John Piper, revising Abrams, emphasizes the cautious acceptance of war and the unified diligence with which Protestant and Catholic leadership alike pursued the establishment of a ministry to the men fighting and dying in France. Richard Gamble works the space between Abrams and Piper, explaining but sharply critiquing Progressive Christian worldviews. Though his book is roughly similar to this one in its narrative arc and its desire to situate the Great War in American religious history, our two studies differ in focus. Gamble is concerned with the thoughts and words of religious and political leaders.<sup>33</sup> This book describes the thoughts and beliefs of soldiers and war workers.

## RECORDS OF FAITH IN THE FIGHT: LETTERS, DIARIES, MEMOIRS

Wartime, for all of its enduring tragedies and travesties, presents historians of religion in America with amazing opportunities. Wars are times of separation and precariousness; they are times when the normally reticent find their voices and use them to reflect on God's place in their lives

and in history, on death and its meaning, and on the contours of the afterlife.<sup>34</sup> There are indeed atheists in foxholes as there are in manholes and mineshafts and tractors and cubicles, but the foxhole (or trench) dweller seems to take more time to reflect on atheism—or the many theisms he or she might claim—and on the relationship between belief and action. Those who survive war and those who live on having lost one or more loved ones also seem to do more than others to preserve memories and records. War's macabre gift to the historian of religion is this combination of existential anxiety, an impulse to write, and a commonly felt desire to preserve.<sup>35</sup>

This study is based on the personal and public writings of American soldiers and war workers who served in the Great War. I am using the term "American soldier" more loosely than will be comfortable for some. I have examined materials written not only by the young men who fought in the American Expeditionary Force, but also by those who, as early as August of 1914, boarded ships bound for France and volunteered their services. I have considered the words of American airmen alongside those of artillerymen and infantry. "American" thus indicates individual nationality rather than the national identity of the army in which a man fought, while "soldier" indicates involvement in the war in a military capacity. The benefits and costs of such a loose definition will become apparent throughout the course of the study. Chief among the benefits is the recovery of experiences of young American men, such as Pennsylvania native Edwin Abbey and South Carolinian Kiffin Rockwell, who understood that their religiously framed duty required them to step outside of the national collective and fight on behalf of the world, and Kenneth MacLeish and Hamilton Coolidge, aviators who reflected on the relationship between faith and violence, the meaning of death, and the shape of the afterlife. Central among the hazards is the diminution of divisions that were, to some, very important. American aviators, for instance, often drew the ire of American infantrymen for the relative comfort of the conditions in which they lived and for an over-developed sense of self-importance. Had I found among the various groups a wider range of understandings of the issues I take up, I would have done more to maintain these distinctions.

By "war workers" I mean the tens of thousands of men and women who served in the many non-military support agencies in France and England. In places, the phrase "war worker" may appear to be synonymous with "woman." That this is not the case is important to keep in mind, especially when considering the relationship between experiences of violence, gender, and authority that were expressed and negotiated in the war's midst.<sup>36</sup> The fact that women and men both served in the YMCA cast a shadow over the claims of "Y-men" to war-verified masculinity. As

one soldier put it in a letter about veterans organizations, “. . . [war workers] are not soldiers, and there is no more reason why they should belong [to the American Legion] than there is why the women who drove automobiles around in the States and wore fancy uniforms should be included in a veteran corps.”<sup>37</sup> I have also included among “war workers” the American men and women who served in the war service corps of Britain and France.

The “personal literature” of American soldiers and war workers includes letters, diaries, and memoirs. I drew the vast majority of these from the New York Public Library’s collection of American Great War narratives. Because most of these were preserved through publication—vanity and commercial—my sources include the voices of many young men and women who came from wealthy families, were themselves wealthy enough to fund a private printing, or were otherwise inclined to seek and secure publication and preservation of their war-time thoughts.<sup>38</sup> This impulse to publish and preserve was not, however, the monopoly of the wealthy, and when exercised by them did not catch only “elite” voices. One collection, *Dear Folks at Home: The Glorious Story of the United States Marines in France as Told by Their Letters from the Battlefield*, compiled by Kemper F. Cowing, edited by Courtney Riley Cooper, and published in 1919 contains excerpts from the correspondence of U.S. Marines of all ranks and regions.<sup>39</sup> Another collection, *Echoes from Over There: By the Men of the Army and Marine Corps Who Fought in France*, edited by Craig Hamilton and Louise Corbin and published in 1919, contains thirty-seven separate narratives written by a variety of men, including a corporal who was a chauffeur in Chicago, a sergeant who was a boxing instructor in New York City, a private from Ohio, and a corporal born in Italy. These collections bring a socio-economic and regional diversity that begins to balance the Coolidges and Blodgetts, Roosevelts and Kilmers. I am not the first to examine this literature. Something of it is present in the work of David Kennedy, Jennifer Keene, and Mark Meigs. Charles Genthe compiled a catalog, *American War Narratives, 1914–1918*, that provides brief descriptions of many collections and narratives but gives little in the way of analysis or context. I am, as far as I can discern, the first to examine as many narratives as I do (219 distinct volumes, well over 300 voices) and to do so with an eye toward religion.<sup>40</sup>

The voices of African American soldiers in this book come primarily from a post-war survey of veterans conducted by the Commonwealth of Virginia. The survey was conducted between 1919 and 1921 and collected responses from over 14,000 former soldiers, 2,400 of whom were African American. Though this source is potentially problematic for reasons I discuss in chapter 4, it is also amazingly rich and, unlike the survey of Great War veterans conducted by the United States Army fifty years later,

contains a question about the effects of war experiences on religious beliefs. Survey responses are, of course, a limited genre. It was hard if not impossible for a soldier to weave a textured narrative of war experiences in the few lines provided. But the soldiers who responded to the survey were still able to convey their thoughts and emotions quite effectively, and wrote powerfully and poignantly of faith in the fight.<sup>41</sup>

American soldiers and war workers, while religiously concerned and to varying degrees traditionally religiously engaged, did not write with anything like systematic clarity and precision. Their theologies are at times difficult to ascertain. Their narratives are by turns compelling and frustrating, funny and tragic. Religion emerges in surprising places. Thomas Barber, an infantry officer in the A.E.F. (American Expeditionary Force) recalled seeing “two buddies walking abreast in a column,” both of whom had conspired to bring together Protestant hymnody and the equipment of war. “One had painted on his [gas mask],—‘Abide in me from morn till eve, for without thee I cannot live.’ And his friend had,—‘I need thee, Oh! I need thee, every hour I need thee.’”<sup>42</sup> In the intermittent chaos of war, these men—tongues firmly in cheeks—turned to a “savior” other than Jesus and offered wry commentary of the kind of salvation most meaningful to them: salvation of their hides. Authors also treat religion in unpredictable ways. Elmer Haslett’s memoir, based on his letters and diary and published in 1920, begins with a detailed description of his understanding of prayer.

I began to think about my first trip over the lines that was soon to come. I was mentally lower than a snake. I hadn’t prayed for some time and I was just wondering whether or not I would pray that night. My solemn idea of prayer was that it was an emergency measure. I was always reverently thankful to the Maker for His blessings, but He knew that for He must have known my mind. I believed that God helped him who helped himself, but when the question was too big for man to control, then it was the time to invoke the help of the Supreme Being.

Haslett then revealed that in spite of the dangers involved in his upcoming mission, he had “decided that I would go ahead and handle it as a man to man proposition, reserving invocation for a more serious situation.” He changed his mind, however, as he walked back to his room and heard a noise: “a big cat jumped out of a box and ran directly in front of me. It was too dark, of course, to tell the color of the cat, but the condition of my mind convinced me that it could be no other color than black and that it was an omen that bad luck was sure to come my way.” It was at that moment, Haslett wrote, that he decided he would pray. The very next paragraph, though, offers no description of the content of his prayers, no evidence that he even carried his decision through to action. Rather, Has-

lett tells of lying awake for three hours thinking about all of the things that could go wrong with the machine gun he was to operate.<sup>43</sup> What one can discern from this passage—understandings of when a man should and should not pray, the interaction between superstition and the impulse to pray—is a bit removed from the more obvious question: For what did he and other soldiers pray?

I have tried in the course of this study to preserve the rough edges of individual voices while also working from points of near consensus in the sources (of which there are many) to generalizations about the faith of American soldiers and war workers and the interaction of that faith with wartime and post-war realities. I do not wish to write all particularities into insignificance, but to the extent that this project succeeds in the task of generalizing, it will also fail to be entirely true to the unique men and women on whose lives and words it is built. In my use and analysis of soldiers' personal writings I have been mindful of a warning issued by Great War veteran and eminent New Testament scholar Amos Wilder. "It is all too easy to oversimplify the motives of the combatants in the Great War, as in any war. . . . One should recognize the great differences of maturity, perspective, and commitment of those involved. The anonymous soldiery, moreover, are commonly inarticulate, but their collaboration may often be animated by deeper fealties than those generally invoked." To assume that the three hundred voices consulted in reconstructing those moments exhaust all possible religious reactions would be foolish. To assume that language and memory were fully adequate to the task of capturing every religious thought or emotion would betray the words of the soldiers themselves. Still, I believe the conclusions I have reached apply widely, if not uniformly, among the Americans who fought the Great War.<sup>44</sup>

Soldiers' and war workers' writings do not allow the honest historian to write a polemical history or a predictable ideological critique. As much as one may love or hate the idea of war, love or hate the men and women who plan wars and send others to die, love or hate those who profit financially or politically from war, the voices of soldiers and war workers will provide, at most, equivocal support. The voices in this study and this study itself will disappoint those looking either for a story of disillusionment and disgust with the Great War or for a triumphalist paean to the nation, its war dead, and their motives.

#### LANGUAGE, POETICS, MEMORY, AND RELIGION

Many soldiers and war workers left behind words of caution as they attempted to share their thoughts. What we are experiencing, they wrote,

is impossible for the uninitiated to understand. Language, they wrote, is inadequate to describe war.<sup>45</sup> Writing of the moments immediately following a deadly shelling, Leo Jacks observed that the descriptive tools at the disposal of his comrades were simply inadequate to the task. “Curiously enough, one or two of our hardened battalion cried bitterly when they saw . . . friends knocked down, quivering, and dead beside them; passing quickly from tears to outbursts of helpless rage and hoarse vows that they would kill impossible numbers of the enemy in retaliation, angry threats solemnized by a meaningless flood of curses. Language seemed to have lost, finally, all significance, and there were no words left to express men’s ideas.”<sup>46</sup> Language cannot and did not lose *all* significance. Not, at least, for those who recorded or memorialized their experiences and ideas in writing. At the same time that the Great War unmade language and worlds through pain, it evoked language, analogies, and theologies.<sup>47</sup> Men and women did their best to describe their thoughts and their beliefs, even when language seemed inadequate; and even in inadequate attempts to describe those “dreadful” and “paralyzing” moments, the historian of American religion has much to learn. War belittled soldiers, making them feel insignificant and powerless. War emboldened soldiers, making them glimpse the apparent grandeur of martyrdom and immortality. War made a soldier feel alone and, alone with his faith, led him to draw on the elements of faith that were of the greatest importance to him, and in which he found the greatest comfort.

Religious experiences and war experiences, when distinct from one another, share an indescribability that is as common among those who experience either as it is vexing to those who study either. Yet, at the points in the Great War where experiences of religion and war overlapped, these two “indescribable” experiences helped clarify each other. Infantry officer Vinton Dearing wrote to his mother of one such point in his encounter with war. Struggling to explain his reactions to encounters with wonder and danger, things mystical and things military, he turned to the language of religion.

This life does give you a love of nature, a love of that which is just beyond the human grasp. You go out into the moonlight and feel the place “holy and enchanted,” a new world, half mystical, a different moon, more wondrous lights;—then some tremendous 155 goes off and shatters your dream. . . . Life is great and the aims of the war are great. It is when you see into the aims with your inner eyes that you see the bigness of it all. Just like religion, those moments are few and far between, yet it is like the Mount of Transfiguration when you go up and receive inspiration anew.<sup>48</sup>

Religion provided a vocabulary to help render war experiences meaningful and war provided an arena in which faith could be lived out, tested, and animated. As we will see, religion also did a great deal of the work needed to romanticize war, and allowed many soldiers to ignore or glorify war's horrors.

Soldiers' widespread use of poetry as a means of expression may seem out of character in a self-consciously masculine crowd. The editors of *The Stars and Stripes*, the soldiers themselves, and historians of the Great War have noted, sometimes with amusement, how frequently soldiers lapsed into verse. Three points on soldierly poetry are worth noting briefly. First, poetry was not a "feminine" mode of expression in 1918. The generation of Americans that went to war was reared on the masculine poetry of, among others, Rudyard Kipling and Robert W. Service. Second, soldiers appear to have been quite taken with the war poems of Service, Alan Seeger, Rupert Brooke, and dozens of lesser lights, and to have been moved toward poetics by their work. Third and perhaps most importantly, poetry, as Amos Wilder wrote late in his life, was sometimes the only mode of expression adequate to the task of describing war experiences. Reflecting on his poem "Armageddon," Wilder noted, "Human experience is not one-dimensional, and the deeper import of even less dramatic actions calls across time and space for answering voices. For me, this episode really happened in a way which imposed itself on my later visionary transcription. The toiling line of the whole brigade likewise had its inklings of that transposed reality which the poetic version alone could seek to articulate."<sup>49</sup> Poetry, as literature scholar James Anderson Winn has argued, has long been used to capture, express, and sometimes to obscure experiences of war and the associated emotions.<sup>50</sup> It is often in American soldiers' poems that their most profound religious insights emerge.

I have struggled with the question of what to make of soldiers' poems, letters, and diaries and the strong notes of wartime romanticism they contain.<sup>51</sup> Did soldiers and war workers *really* imagine the war in such strongly religious terms? How much of their minds, hearts, and souls can one actually find in their words, and how much is better treated as a performance staged for friends and family? What are we to make, for example, of the words of Americans Victor Chapman and Richard Blodgett who, having seen the dangers of aerial combat, each wrote letters to friends expressing the belief that they would not survive the war, while also writing to a parent that they were confident of survival?<sup>52</sup> I have chosen in this book to treat the literal meaning of the texts I read as meaningful moments of communication representative of the truth as soldiers saw it in the moment. One must, of course, remain aware of and attentive to the interwoven complexities of human emotion and of lan-



guage, but I have found that analyzing the words soldiers chose allows one to do just that while avoiding the worst kinds of reductionism. To return briefly to Chapman and Blodgett, while we may wish to treat one voice (the pessimist) as authentic and the other (the optimist) as inauthentic, things are not as simple as that. For Chapman, Blodgett, and others were certainly capable of feeling doomed one day and bulletproof the next, and in their writings we can well imagine that they were addressing (and comforting, and leveling with) themselves as much as they were addressing an external “audience.” Poetic invocations of the militant Christ and lyrical appeals to God can be—and were—prayerful and expressive of deep religious emotions; they were, at times, also the product of a moment in which a soldier or war worker, seized by the adventure, chose to indulge in some self-conscious religious romanticism for his or her own benefit and for the edification of a home-front audience.

*THE STARS AND STRIPES: AN OFFICIAL RECORD  
OF FAITH IN THE FIGHT*

The “public literature” considered in this study consists mainly of *The Stars and Stripes*, the official newspaper of the American Expeditionary Force, published between February 8, 1918 and June 13, 1919. At its wartime peak on November 8, 1918, the paper’s circulation reached 344,000; circulation did not peak, however, until February 7, 1919, when it climbed to a stunning 522,000 copies. Given that approximately ten percent of the copies were designated for stateside consumption and—at its height—the A.E.F. presence in France consisted of roughly two million soldiers, there was one copy of the paper in circulation for every six to seven soldiers while the war was still on, and one for every four to five soldiers after the Armistice.<sup>53</sup>

Caution toward *The Stars and Stripes* as a source is healthy. The paper’s relationship to the A.E.F. hierarchy—specifically the morale department of the intelligence branch—should raise concerns about the paper’s claim to be “by and for the American soldier,” despite the literal truth of this statement.<sup>54</sup> What the masthead meant, and what the mostly enlisted staff cultivated, was the “half-truth” that *The Stars and Stripes* was a completely open forum for the American soldier to express his views and to read those of others, apart from the shaping hand of officialdom. This it was not. The bulk of the writing was indeed done by enlisted men—most of whom had prior experience in journalism, many of whom would go on to dazzling careers in the field. The editorial board was also made up of enlisted men. The paper’s editor-in-chief was, as one would expect, an officer—first Guy Viskniski, then future Pulitzer Prize winner Mark

Watson—and the content was sent to headquarters each week to be vetted. The result of this oversight was not, however, a well-combed propaganda sheet. Letters that complained of privations, editorials that railed against home-front Christian moralists, cartoons both solemn and funny, poems militant and mournful, and article-length attempts to make sense of the chaos of war came together in this widely available meaning-making forum. The censorial hand of hierarchs and of the French *Bureau de la Presse* was waiting at the boundaries—as it was for all papers, but those boundaries were both wide and roughly coincident with soldierly opinion as present in the personal literature.<sup>55</sup> Although often without the flair of *The Stars and Stripes* staff writers Grantland Rice, Harold Ross, Hudson Hawley, or Alexander Woollcott, soldiers wrestled in many of the same ways with the same issues raised by war.

As a window onto the religious mind of the American soldier, *The Stars and Stripes* is quite valuable. The meaning-making in which *The Stars and Stripes* editors and contributors engaged was communal and controlled, and at times incorporated imagery and prose that may have been beyond most soldiers. Yet the correlation is strong between the paper's editorial voice and soldiers' writings on clergy, Christian duty, and the aims of war. Soldiers' poems and letters published by the paper echo sentiments contained in soldiers' personal writings as to the fiendishness of the enemy, the religiously transformative nature of combat experience, and the soldier as imitator of Christ. On these points of agreement, I have used *The Stars and Stripes* frequently, treating it as a communal voice. On points of difference—usually differences of degree and not kind—I have noted the differences.

## CHAPTERS

This book as a whole focuses on continuity in the midst of rupture. It charts and describes and contextualizes small changes, to be sure, but it is not about the death of an old order and the birth of a new. It is about the reassertion of religious ideas and ideals in the face of war and in war's aftermath. It is, in short, a story of reillusionment.

The narrative begins, as war experiences begin, with ideas about war and speculation as to war's effects on individuals and communities. Chapter 1, "Redemption through War," focuses on soldiers' and war workers' understandings of the religious meaning of the Great War. In it, I examine the religiously framed hopes that Americans waging the war had for the world, the nation, and for themselves. Though different in many ways with regard to theology and practice, men and women, black and white, Protestant and Catholic saw the war in remarkably similar religious

terms. Chapter 2, “Chance the Man-Angel and the Combat Numinous,” examines soldiers’ theologies of the design of combat. Central to this chapter is the connection between encountering overwhelming industrial violence and the invigoration that soldiers and war workers associated with experiences of combat. As the chapter title indicates, I have made reference to the work of Rudolf Otto, whose *The Idea of the Holy* was published first during the war, to help explicate this connection. Chapter 3, “Suffering, Death, and Salvation” looks closely at the religious concepts and symbols soldiers used to make sense of death in war. The suffering and bleeding, writhing and dying they wrote, time and again, were modern forms of martyrdom and *imitatio Christi*, which brought salvation to the fallen.

Chapter 4, “Christ’s Cause, Pharaoh’s Army,” examines continuities and discontinuities between religious dimensions of black soldiers’ war experiences and those of their white counterparts. Black soldiers’ encounters with war were shaped by the institutionalized racism of the United States, but also by the hope that war service would dissolve that racism. The religious reflections of black soldiers and veterans give a great deal of space to hopes for redemption and to claims of authority derived from war, themes that figured prominently among black soldiers in the Civil War and white soldiers in the Great War, but do not discuss Christ and Christ’s relationship to violence in the same militant tone. Chapter 5, “Ideal Women in an Ideal War,” examines women’s accounts of their war experiences and the gender roles present in them. This chapter describes and discusses the religious dimensions of three overlapping but distinct visions of womanhood in the Great War: War Wives and Mothers, Sisters in Arms, and New Woman Warriors. This formulation helps account for the depth and breadth of women’s commitments to the war, to warriors, and to Western Front domesticity, while also drawing attention to women’s creative engagement with, and critical reflections on, the culture war. (Though voices of African Americans and women are present in the first four chapters, more focused treatments have enabled me to draw out some distinctive religious dimensions of their war experiences.) Chapter 6, “There Are No Dead,” continues to examine the religious implications of life in a world where death was so powerful a presence. This chapter takes cues from the work of Ann Douglas, Colleen McDannell, and Drew Gilpin Faust and reads soldiers’ visions of the afterlife, including the porous nature of the boundary between this life and the next, both as projections of soldiers’ ideals and as assertions of religious and cultural authority to which a range of individuals and organizations would lay claim after the war. The seventh and final chapter discusses the post-war period, the rise of the American Legion, and the religiousness of the Legion’s ongoing war to shape and sanctify the United States.

The events set in motion by the Great War and its resolution shaped profoundly the twentieth century—its ideologies, political actors, tragedies, and cultural voices. Because it became, in relatively short order, a tragic “prequel” to a truly global war, the Great War is often treated as of little ultimate consequence for America. I hope that among the other contributions this work makes, it will aid in bringing back into focus a moment in American history rife with lessons and challenges for our own day. The crowning lesson of the Great War is that war is always and everywhere more powerful than those who wage it. When well-meaning men and women decide to enter a war they are—more than they do on a daily basis—entering into an agreement with history governed only by the laws of unintended consequences. Purity of motive, loftiness of aspiration, and depth of conviction are security blankets rather than insurance policies. They offer comfort but no protection from history’s bogeymen. That truth seems to hang just beyond the grasp of every generation. It remained so elusive in the twentieth century due in no small part to America’s experience of the Great War and to the post-war actions of America’s Great War veterans.