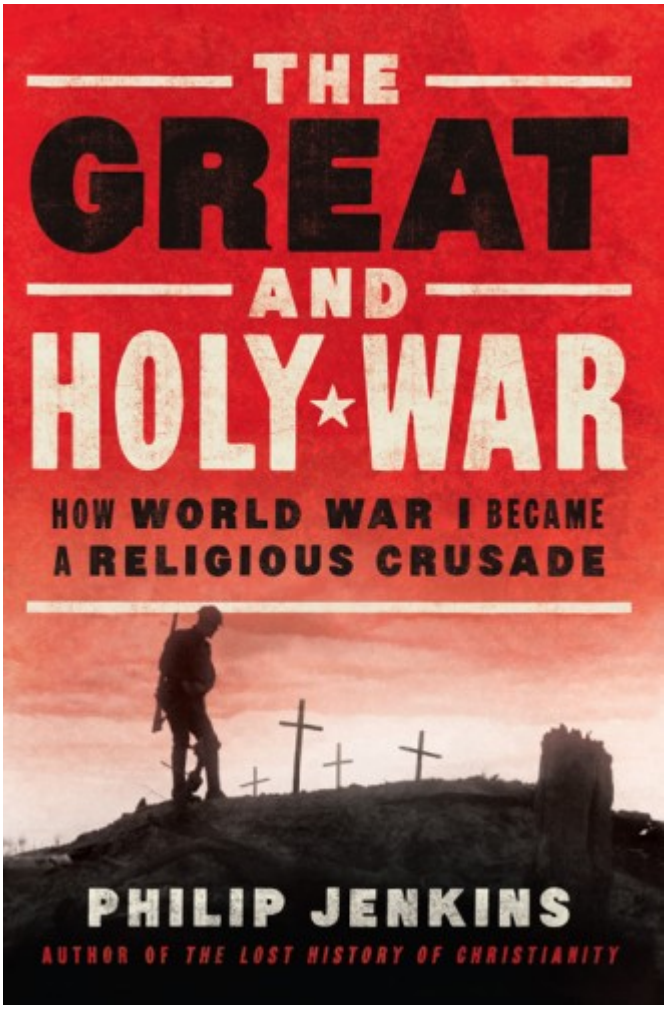
Christians killing Christians

by Jonathan H. Ebel in the June 25, 2014 issue

In Review



The Great and Holy War

By Philip Jenkins
HarperOne

In this centennial of the beginning of the Great War, citizens, scholars, artists, and politicians will set aside time, measure out words, and use painting, sculpture, and film to recall the four years of ferocious violence that shaped the modern world. This

is both good and important.

It is good because the Great War has too long been overshadowed—especially in the United States—by the still greater war that came along two decades later. It is important because the lessons of the Great War are both more enduring and more applicable to our current religio-political moment than those that emerged from the mid-century struggle against expansionist totalitarianisms.

For many, the lessons of the Great War revolve around accidents of history and their ability to warp the noblest of intentions. For others these lessons pertain to the interconnectedness of “progress” and barbarity. Still others see the Great War as a case study in the waste that governments and industry are willing to generate in pursuit of power and wealth.

In recent years more scholars have begun to examine the Great War for lessons about religion and war. The result has been a small but fascinating collection of works on the religious cultures of combatant nations as they were expressed by politicians, civilian clergy, chaplains, and military personnel. For the most part, these works have focused on single nations, weaving together the religious, the social, and the military in meaningful but bounded studies—monographs in the truest sense.

Philip Jenkins builds upon this specialized historiography as it treats the Great War as a global religious conflict. His vividly written synthesis belongs at the top of reading lists on the conflict.

Not only does Jenkins provide detailed accounts of interactions between religion and militarism, religion and combat, and religion and trauma on all sides of the war, he also demonstrates that the world torn apart by the Great War was a world of many shared religious concerns and vocabularies, a world that needed the extreme fission that religion accomplishes in order to launch and sustain such a brutal conflict.

With the balance and perspective of an experienced historian, Jenkins presents and interprets the religious cultures of the warring nations alongside each other, building as convincing an argument as I have yet seen for the deep importance of religion at all levels and in all phases of the war.

“Christian leaders,” he writes, “gave an absolute religious underpinning to warfare conducted by states that were seen as executing the will of God.” But this sacralization was something more than the eager pronouncements of self-important

or sycophantic divines. It emerged from and to a large extent harmonized with "religious language and assumptions [that] were omnipresent, . . . part of the air people breathed."

Popular tales of angels and ghosts fighting alongside soldiers, reflections on the workings of fate and chance, and stories equating the suffering, dying soldier with Christ emerged on both sides of the Western Front and on most European and American home fronts, demonstrating a widespread predisposition to view and experience the war as more than an earthly endeavor. The words of one German soldier fighting at Verdun could well have been written by a soldier or civilian on the other side of the war: "Here we have war, war in its most appalling form, and in our distress we realize the nearness of God."

Jenkins also moves the narrative beyond the trenches of the Western Front to the far reaches of the warring empires to demonstrate that the religious effects of the conflict—and attempts to discern religious meaning in it—extended well beyond Europe and what was once called Christendom. This broad approach bears good fruit as he weaves into the narrative a wide range of actors, actions, and alliances and argues for the global religious consequences of the Great War.

"When elites might have become secular," Jenkins writes, "ordinary people tended to maintain their faiths against those of their rulers, whether in Ireland, India, or Armenia, and religious identifications became all the stronger in times of conflict." Though the heart of his story is still the war on the Western front, the religious dynamics of the Eastern front, the communist war against the Russian Orthodox Church, the Armenian genocide, struggles among religious actors in India, Africa, and Singapore, and postwar religious nationalisms all find their way into his narrative in meaningful ways. These events, and the identities that shaped and were shaped by them, did not vanish into history when the Allies and Germany signed a ceasefire agreement at 11 a.m. on November 11, 1918.

As with any work of historical synthesis so broad in scope, *The Great and Holy War* gives up something in nuance and specificity to gain what it does in breadth. But other than a few overstretched comparisons to current religious militarisms, the trade seems well worth it. Jenkins's in-text citations and thorough notes will lead the interested reader to more than enough specificity. (For instance, the archives of the *Christian Century* offer example after example of full-throated support for America's righteous war against Germany.)

Had Jenkins invested more time in discussing regional or national specifics, the book might not have been as effective as it is in recovering the rhetoric, symbols, expectations, and narratives shared by the warring powers. These compelling and troubling comparisons make the Great War seem all the more tragic, all the more perverse, all the more important to study.

With so much in common both in the mainstream and at the margins, how could such a chasm have opened between the nations? How could so many lives have been swallowed? Comprehensive answers elude us still, but Jenkins’s excellent study demonstrates that the pursuit of such answers requires us to look closely at religion—even if we are tempted to look away.