

TEACH^R

Religion and the Myth of Anzac: applications for the classroom

Daniel Reynaud

Emeritus Professor, Avondale University, Cooranbong, NSW
daniel.reynaud@avondale.edu.au

Eva Foster

Oxford Falls Grammar
evaf@ofg.nsw.edu.au

Keywords: Anzac mythology; Religion and Anzac; Australian History; NSW Stage 5 History syllabus

Abstract

This article critically examines the dominant narrative myth of Anzac secularism in relation to the new NSW Stage 5 History syllabus, exploring the active engagement with spirituality by the soldiers. The article advocates for history educators to empower students with a critical and empathetic engagement with sources. This approach aligns directly with the new NSW Stage 5 History syllabus, particularly the Making a Nation — Federation to WWI (1889–c1919) Depth Study, which requires students to explore perspectives on the impacts of WWI and aspects of the daily life of soldiers. The ‘Perspectives’ points in the ‘Historical Concepts’ sections of the syllabus are also covered here as they ask students to interrogate ‘how points of view can be shaped by available sources of information’ while ‘thinking critically and identifying bias and omissions’. Looking at the Anzac story in this way allows students to develop their skills in historical inquiry and the interpretation of sources. Recognising the complexities of Anzac spirituality enriches classroom teaching, challenges national myths, and offers a deeper understanding of Australia’s evolving cultural and religious identity.

Religion and the Myth of Anzac: applications for the classroom

Anzac secularity and spirituality

For some time, the Anzac narrative has had a privileged place in Australian history teaching, with students ‘now conceptualised as the inheritors of

the Anzac spirit and its custodians’. With powerful official advocates such as the Department of Veterans’ Affairs, it has been made to appear ‘our dominant national tradition’, a narrative which has ‘marginalised other stories, different historic sites and other conceptions of national values’. (Lake, 2010, 137–8). Yet not only has it disempowered other national narratives, it has also marginalised aspects of its own history in creating a myth of Anzac. Having been both deliberately constructed and shaped by gradual cultural influences over decades, the Anzac story is contestable in multiple areas. However, this needs to be done with sensitivity, as contradicting elements of Anzac mythology is ‘fraught territory’ though ‘it would be a dereliction of duty’ to allow the myth ‘to go unquestioned and unchallenged’ (Crotty, 2009, 15).

The myth cherishes the bushman Anzac, although less than one in five were from the bush, hardly surprising when four out of five Australians lived in cities and towns in 1914. The myth also associates the diggers with an overtly Australian and anti-British nationalism when, in fact, virtually all Australians at the time identified as British Australians and no fewer than one in five of the Anzacs was born in Britain (Crotty, 2009, 14). They fought to keep Australia British and white, their racist nationalism an additional feature at odds with Anzac mythology. This article focuses on another contestable element of the Anzac myth – that they were overwhelmingly secular in attitude and outlook.

Indeed, there are well-credentialled historians who label the Anzacs as being secular. Official war historian C.E.W. Bean (1921, 6) argued that the Australian soldier ‘was seldom religious’, substituting mateship for religion. Both Ken Inglis (2005, 214) and Bill Gammage (1980, xiv–xv) have labelled the ‘average Australian’ soldier as ‘not

“
the Anzac
story is
contestable
in multiple
areas
”

religious'. Light Horse historian Henry Gullet (1941, 38) labelled the attribution of any religious feeling or motivation to the Australian soldiers as 'pure literary extravagance'. Popular narratives of Anzac also represent the digger as being strictly secular. For instance, the mini-series *Gallipoli* (2015) gradually relegates religion to the margins until finally a dead man's mates conduct a secular burial service for him after a chaplain refuses the duty. This secular Anzac mythology is an extension of a secularising tendency in Australian historiography, for it will be no surprise to historians that the history they write reflects their own cultural bias. Several have noted that most Australian historians 'omit discussion of religion or ... downplay its significance' (Carey, 2014, 17). For teachers, challenging the prevailing secular narrative provides an opportunity to foster a more nuanced understanding and encourage critical engagement. Exposing students to diverse viewpoints and presenting varied perspectives empowers them to critically assess historical memory and its representation, and to use evidence to support an opinion.

The secular interpretation of Anzac is increasingly challenged by scholarship that reveals the true role of religion in the story of the Anzacs. Linder's (2000) pioneering study of evangelicalism in Australia during World War One began focusing attention on the active engagement of Christians within the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), the army recruited to fight in Europe and the Middle East. Linder also critiqued the secular narratives put forward by Gammage (1980, xiv) in particular, noting how the quotes from soldier diaries in Gammage's work were 'replete with religious imagery and references to Christianity, and brimming with morality and moral judgement', despite his argument of a lack of evidence for soldier spirituality. For example, several of Gammage's quotes speak of assurance of the Resurrection if they were killed, while another stated that he and his fellows were 'men enough to die for all that Christianity stands for, for the Liberty we've always talked about' (Gammage, 45, 49, 187, 191, 211, 220).

The last ten years have seen a proliferation of evidence for the spiritual engagement of the Anzacs. Gladwin's (2015) official history of the Australian Army Chaplaincy Corps finds strong evidence for a positive relationship between chaplains and soldiers, again contradicting the myth that Australian soldiers intrinsically distrusted chaplains (Gammage, 1980, xiv). Bale's (2015) study of AIF headstone inscriptions led him to conclude that the soldiers were more religious than previously thought, where 'a more positive

reassessment is needed regarding the religious devotion of Australian soldiers'. Reynaud's (2018) analysis of a thousand soldiers' diaries and letters concluded that somewhere between one-fifth to a quarter of the soldiers were active Christians, while a large percentage of the rest were sympathetic or neutral. Lake's (2020) history of the Bible in Australia and Gladwin's (2023) article both uncovered widespread use of the Bible by soldiers during the war.

In fact, the decades in which the Anzacs were raised were the most religious in Australian history. Church attendance peaked in the late 1800s and early 1900s, as high as 50 per cent of the population, during the childhood and teenage years of the vast majority of the Anzacs (Inglis, 2007, 17). So it is no surprise to find that a significant number of Anzacs had a religious upbringing, and that many were active Christians during the war years. Australian culture at the time was still fundamentally Christian in values and beliefs, even for those who professed no active religious engagement. The much-vaunted secular nature of Australian society referred to the separation of religion and public life, not the abandonment of religious belief. Indeed, it was Christians who led the charge for the separation of politics and religion, including advocating for secular state education. The use of the word 'secular' meant maintaining a generic Christianity without having one denomination dominate the others (Possamai and Tittensor, 2021, 41). The Anzacs, like the society from which they came, accepted Christian values and morality as the norm, for while few could elaborate on theological matters, they practised a culturally ingrained form of Christianity. Around 98% of Australians self-identified as Christian at the time.

The reality is that the concept of the secular Anzac is as misleading as the notion of Australia as a secular country. The popular journal *The Bulletin* promoted a strongly anti-religious and republican version of Australia around the turn of the twentieth century. However, this period was one when not only public religious observance peaked, but also British imperial sentiment, as government education departments installed 'a barrage of imperial propaganda in the school curriculum' (Beaumont, 1995, 3). Elements of this dynamic remain as History teachers are still subject to government and NESA directives that shape not merely what is taught in classrooms but also the perspectives which should be emphasised.

Ironically, while contemporary Australia's secularity broadly appears to be growing according to the census, the popularity of Christian education does not reflect this trend. Christian Schools

“
the concept
of the secular
Anzac is as
misleading
as the notion
of Australia
as a secular
country”

Australia member schools experienced a 14% increase in enrolments from 2021 to 2022, and some small regional Christian schools reported growth of more than 65%, while larger metropolitan schools in growth corridors saw increases exceeding 57% (https://www.csa.edu.au/CSA/CSA/Resources-and-Media/Media-Centre/Media-Release/2022/Christian_Schools_Buck_Census_Trend.aspx). The ongoing tension between Australia's surface secularity and its underlying cultural realities mirrors the complexities seen during the Anzac era. Just as it is today, it remains challenging to perceive the role religion plays in shaping Australian society during World War I. The meaning and influence of religion continue to be nuanced, evolving, and difficult to capture in simplistic terms. Thus, a study of the Anzac past helps inform us of the present.

“
what most objected to was the enforcement of religious activities such as compulsory Church Parades
”

Anzac appearance and reality

There is no doubt that the Anzacs maintained a secular façade, resisting official religious activities. However, this is misleading, for a close study of their own writings reveals that what most objected to was the enforcement of religious activities such as compulsory Church Parades (Reynaud, 2018, 33-65). Opposition to compulsory religion was an extension of a widespread resistance to any authority figure within the AIF. It was also a resistance to the tedium of preparing for formal Church Parades, spending a couple of hours cleaning their equipment, then standing for perhaps another hour or two for inspection and announcements before the church service proper commenced. Soldiers who were devout Christians hated these events just as much as those who were not religious. Even one chaplain complained that preparation and ‘interminable inspections’ left both soldiers and chaplain annoyed, but that ‘did not prove a lack of religious feeling, but merely a spirit of protest against an out of date military custom’ (Reynaud, 2018, 43).

Even despite the inbuilt disincentives in Church Parades, many soldiers expressed appreciation for their spiritual content. One soldier wrote of an upcoming Church Parade that ‘we look forward to it.’ On Gallipoli, a group of soldiers specifically asked for a Church Parade from their popular padre and held one of the largest ever seen on the peninsula (Reynaud, 2018, 51, 58).

Chaplains wrote of the tendency for soldiers to conceal their ‘fine religious sense and faith in the Divine Power’ under ‘various and often grotesque disguises’ (Beveridge, 1921), describing the digger as a “hypocrite” or perhaps to put it more mildly, a “camouflage artist”, hiding below the surface ‘a real

sense of God and of His moral Law’ (Blackwood, 1919). As another chaplain wrote, ‘That it was not the [compulsory Church Parade] service itself which was resented in the great majority of cases was amply proved by the fact that in camp and on troopships there was no lack of attendance at the voluntary services so often held, while every imaginable excuse was offered as a reason for not attending compulsory parades.’ (Reynaud, 2018, 68). Soldiers also attended, and even organised and ran, voluntary Bible study groups, prayer meetings and religious sing-songs.

Resistance to official religion can be understood as part of maintaining the public image of the subversive Anzac. Indeed, two scholars (Seal, 2004, 3–4, 64; Thomson, 1995, 43–4) talk of a digger identity performance of exaggerating bad behaviour and resistance to authority as part of maintaining ‘the self-image and the projected image of the digger’. One Australian recorded multiple instances of him and a friend playing the part of ‘real Australian bushmen’, entertaining English bystanders with exaggerated Australian slang and stories of prickly pear farms (Gallwey, 1917). It is easy to mistake these behaviours as substantive rather than performative. One chaplain (Crotty, 1920, 95) used synonymous terms for this, writing that Australians felt it was a ‘bounden and decent duty to hide all our loftier feelings’ under an assumed ‘pose’ of indifferent fatalism. ‘There was little of open religious profession: it is not our way; it will never be our way’, he wrote, adding that this apparent religious indifference was routinely misunderstood. It was a manifestation of the soldiers’ desire to project manliness.

The desire to be seen as ‘manly’ within their cultural context is not unique to the Anzac, and the ways this interacts with religion continues to be a factor. Ideas of hegemonic masculinity that would have been commonplace in WWI are both challenged and reinforced in modern religious spaces. Leadership, strength and competition can sit alongside resilience, benevolence, and a sense of purpose beyond worldly achievement. However, openly professing faith remains something that is largely not considered a particularly ‘masculine’, a fact highlighted by Carey (1996, 117) in noting an implied ‘heroic masculine cast to the Australian identity’ where the ‘feminine concern’ of religion is seen as ‘not only unmanly, but un-Australian’. Crotty’s observation reinforces Carey’s conclusion as being valid for the Anzacs. Indeed, the perceived lack of manliness of religion led to an influential ‘masculine Christianity’ movement in the late 1800s (Putney, 2003). For example, the desire to remasculinise Christianity was a key factor behind

the YMCA's emphasis on sports and gymnasiums.

Classroom resources

Some classroom case studies can be conducted from soldier diaries, demonstrating the faith held by many men. This faith was tested, shaken and sometimes lost by their experiences of war. Nevertheless, many men relied on religious beliefs to justify their engagement in the war and manage the traumas that war inflicted on them. In some cases, the soldier's letters and/or diary can be accessed online. Where that is not possible, the chapters in *The Anzacs, Religion and God: The Spiritual Journeys of Twenty-seven Members of the AIF* (Reynaud, 2019) offer 'intensely personal' (Chadwick, 2020) insight into their spiritual journeys through extensive extracts from their writings. The unattributed soldier quotes in the following examples are all taken from the relevant chapters of this book.

Other invaluable resources that will enrich this study include *Captains of the Soul* (Gladwin, 2013), a history of Australian army chaplains that demonstrates through examples the positive relationship between the soldiers and the padres. *Anzac Spirituality* (Reynaud, 2017) explores many facets of Anzac religion, including formal and informal worship services, private devotionals, beliefs around religion and war, and moral and ethical concerns, primarily using hundreds of soldiers' own words drawn from diaries, letters and memoirs. Three other books not only comment on Anzac spirituality but also give a welcome broader historical context and counter the dominant exclusively secular versions of Australian history. *The Bible in Australia: A Cultural History* (Lake, 2020) is a multi-award-winning text that explores the powerful role that the Bible has had throughout our national narrative. Its chapter on the First World War offers many examples of soldiers engaging with faith. These books allow the reader to engage not just with the religious beliefs of the soldiers but also their emotions, creating the opportunity for empathetic engagement with historical evidence.

Attending to the National Soul (Piggin and Linder, 2019), a history of evangelical Christianity in Australia since the First World War not only has a chapter on 'Faith Under Fire' but also gives a broader, richer context to religion at the time. Its companion volume, 'The Fountain of Public Prosperity' (Piggin and Linder, 2018), is also invaluable in giving the context for faith in Australia in the years leading up to the war, as well as offering a perspective-shifting understanding of the centrality of Christianity in Australian history since its European settlement. Each of these books

would enrich a secondary school library and offer the Christian history teacher and student corrective perspectives on one of the most neglected facets of Australian history.

Examples for the classroom

William George Blaskett was a young South Australian Methodist, whose letters home are held in the Australian War Memorial under the digitised collection number 1DRL/0130 and can be downloaded at <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C2632918>.

Blaskett wrote extensively about his faith in many letters. He particularly enjoyed playing the organ in the Presbyterian church in Cairo. He attended there as often as possible, for he said, 'I don't think I shall ever make a good stay-away-from-church person. They have a wonderful attraction for me.' He also enjoyed spending time with the 'very nice daughter' of the American missionaries who attended the church, but on that topic, he concluded 'Nuf said...'

While Blaskett was a teetotaler, he was criticised for smoking. He replied tartly to this in a letter, saying:

I see by your extremely interesting letter that in Mr Wood's opinion no smoker can be a Christian. Tell him, I think no shirker can be a Christian, or, no real Christian can be a *shirker*, whichever he likes. I may be biased, but it seems to me, that fighting for Right against Might, is a very practical form of Christianity.

He wrote home about the many near-misses he had endured, thanking his family for their prayers for his safety. Yet he recognised that this did not guarantee his safety. 'I always ask God if possible to let me return to you all safe and sound but I add, 'Nevertheless, not my will but Thine be done,' and I try to pray it sincerely.'

Commissioned as an officer in March 1917, he was killed at the First Battle of Bullecourt on 11 April 1917. A friend in his battalion wrote to his family, praising him as 'one of the finest young men I have known.' He added, 'I was struck by his manly bearing, and his high moral standing, which must have influenced many with whom he came in contact.' As has been said of Blaskett soon after his death (Reynaud, 2019, 47):

Contrary to the common image of religious men in the army being unpopular and namby-pamby [feeble, timid, insipid], Blaskett was, like a good many Christians in the AIF, competent, courageous, popular and respected, even though he was strict in maintaining his own personal standards.

Eric Chinner was one of the most attractive personalities in the AIF. His letters are also held by the Australian War Memorial, though not yet

“many men relied on religious beliefs to justify their engagement in the war”

digitised. Chinner was a fine all-round scholar, musician and sportsman. Upon enlistment, he rapidly rose through the ranks to be commissioned as an officer and given command of a platoon of about forty soldiers. He actively encouraged participation in Christian activities among his men.

Chinner was convinced of the justice of the war, writing on the occasion of the sinking of the passenger liner *Lusitania*:

this terrible *Lusitania* affair has made me very keen to get to grips with those inhuman brutes. My greatest desire now is to do something to help wipe out such an infamous nation.... I am sure that God will take a strong hand in the war and thoroughly punish Germany for this latest atrocity.

Yet at the same time, he did not wish to fight out of hatred. One padre's sermon helped realign his thinking:

The preacher said of loving one's enemies: "I love the German so much that I have come out here to help thrash the offending Adam out of him." I am trying to develop such a spirit. I do not want to go into battle with a hatred burning up all that is good. That sounds too much like vengeance. But if I can fight with the feeling of punishing them for the evil they have done I will be helping to 'thrash the offending Adam' out of them.

This opens up a discussion about what the phrase 'the offending Adam' means, offering an interesting discussion around the Christian concept of Original Sin, and whether it is possible that inflicting violence can remove it. Nevertheless, it is vital in understanding Chinner's approach to war, seeing it through a theological lens.

He wrote glowingly of services that he attended, some of which moved him to tears, and of the prayers from his family on his behalf. Yet he was also realistic, knowing that prayers did not necessarily protect him from danger. Leading his platoon in battle at the horrific Battle of Fromelles in July 1916, he was mortally wounded, dying in a German hospital. He was buried in a mass grave, which was only rediscovered in 2008. Of him it was written:

he was a Christian, not a namby-pamby, sentimental kind of Christian, but bright, crisp, and real right through.... he is one of the many proofs that a man can be religious and yet be popular in the best sense of the word. He did not lose the respect of men because he was a Christian. He won their respect and kept it because he was absolutely loyal to Jesus Christ.

Some soldiers documented extended spiritual struggles during the war. But these were rarely sparked by the war itself; typically, soldiers brought to the war years a peacetime religious conflict which the war often exacerbated. One of the most prominent examples of this was Thomas Richards. His digitised diary is available at 2DRL0786 at the Australian War Memorial. In fact, he experienced conflict in almost every aspect of his life. He

became an exceptional Rugby player, representing the Wallabies and winning gold with them at the 1908 Olympics. He also represented the British Lions and was almost selected for the South African Springboks. From a working-class tin-mining background, he climbed the social ladder to the respected profession of journalist, yet felt comfortable neither with his poor roots nor with posh society. This did not stop him from pursuing hopeless romances with superficial society girls, though he normally hated pretence. He thought the British cause in the war was not justifiable, yet he volunteered to participate. To avoid killing, he joined the Medical Corps but always felt that it was a cop-out. He disliked officers yet successfully worked to get a commission, winning a high decoration for battlefield bravery.

The same internal conflicts were evident in his spiritual life. He respected his father's simple devotion yet constantly berated himself for not matching it. He disliked the lack of intellectual rigour in non-conformist churches but hated the formality of the more intellectual Anglicanism.

Richards denounced using religion to justify war, calling it 'legalised murder.' He was angry: when the Chaplain tried to justify the Allies' position and asked God for protection and deliverance. The irony of it all! What hypocrisy! Surely this great God, if he has the power to influence victory in any particular way, would also have the power to prevent it at the very first and before lives were sacrificed. It seems ... that man alone can settle and might takes precedence over right.

He respected the Bible and Christianity in principle, but often struggled with the way particular churches, preachers and individuals behaved in the name of God. He felt that religions promoted love, for:

Bitterness and jealousy is not taught in the Bible and yet one often finds it wrapped around the religions of some peoples regardless of their mere form of worship. It's the singing that takes me to Church but my mind is always hoping to hear a reasonable sermon.

An English army chaplain preached a sermon that resonated with him, holding Jesus up as the example, not the preacher himself 'as he knew his own shortcomings only too well.' Richards appreciated the picture of Jesus as not only meek and pure but also muscular and proactive, driving the money-changers out of the temple.

Richards is a reminder that war does not necessarily make men more religious. The famous saying that there are no atheists in foxholes does not bear examination in soldier diaries. Like most soldiers writing of their spiritual thoughts, Richards wrote more about religion when he was out of the

“
Yet he was also realistic, knowing that prayers did not necessarily protect him from danger.
”

trenches, and his religious writings fading as the war progressed.

Other soldiers found that the war exacerbated their negative feelings about faith. John Gray bitterly denounced religion in his lightly fictionalised war memoir *Red Dust*, written under the pseudonym of Donald Black (1931). He wrote of his chaotic emotions in battle, cursing ‘the God that permits it and Christ who died for us as we die now, for what? Must one’s very soul be torn to shreds?’ He hated the hypocrisy behind religious support for the horrible war. He reflected intelligently on faith, morality and war, finding the only redeeming feature to be friendship, and replacing belief in Christianity with fatalism. He regretted the loss of faith, arguing, ‘I want to retain it; it is my sheet anchor; without it I am lost. But strive as I may, the doubt is ever increasing.’ In essence, Gray’s bitterness came from finding that the Christianity he saw in practice was well short of the ideals that he had held for it.

One last example is perhaps representative of where the bulk of Anzacs stood on the matter of religion. Light Horse Major Frank Weir, whose letters are available online at MLMSS 1024 in the State Library of NSW, twice described himself as ‘not religious’ in letters to his mother and wife. However, in each case, the next word was ‘but.’ In the first instance, he followed it up with ‘I do believe and have faith in some higher power.’ In the second, he wrote ‘I do recognize I must be protected by some higher hand – and it is you no doubt praying for me in Australia helps.’ Hence, his non-religion looked different to him than it might to modern Australians, who would expect that a non-religious person would not hold religious beliefs. But Weir clearly did. He expressed faith in the power of prayer. He wrote of biblical events in a manner that showed his implicit belief in them. He labelled Jesus as ‘our Saviour’. While he called out the slack and unprofessional behaviours of some lazy chaplains, he also lavished praise on others who were conscientious in their duties. There were times when he could have avoided church services but attended, and other times when he could not go and expressed regret at not being able to go.

For Weir, the term ‘not religious’ did not indicate an absence of faith in the Bible and Christianity. Rather, it reflected his own attitude of not having a great commitment to active participation in religion. One chaplain characterised the Australian soldier as ‘not adverse to religion, but he is careless and indifferent’ (Frederick Humphery, *Australian Christian Commonwealth*, 5 January 1917, 14). Weir was not careless, but he could be indifferent. He was certainly not averse to religion and engaged with it constructively on many occasions.

In this, he shared an attitude of probably the greater part of the Anzacs. Having been raised in an overtly Christian culture, with perhaps half or more of them having experienced Sunday School or church attendance while growing up, they held a generalised Christian world view and considered its values and morality to be normative. Yet they were not particularly conversant with specific Christian doctrine; few could have spelled out a Christian creed beyond a generic ‘love God and do good to your neighbours’ approach. British historian Michael Snape (2005, 20–22, 243) used the term ‘diffusive Christianity’ to describe British soldierly religion, which is also applicable to the Anzacs. This was an almost universal acceptance of Christian norms and cultural concepts married to a strong personalised religiosity, while at the same time, institutional religion faded as a force.

A classroom case study

In the classroom, students can use these kinds of sources to develop skills in areas such as those presented in the ‘Historical Concepts’ section of the syllabus. A modern-day perspective is often shaped by the available sources of information, making this an interesting exploration of how the selection of sources can influence and change the interpretation and understanding of a subject over time. Also, one of the challenging questions students can face in Stage 6 when analysing sources is to make an assessment of the ‘value’ of a source for historians investigating a specific topic. There is an excellent opportunity here to develop this skill in Stage 5 by providing both the sources and the context for a complex discussion.

For example, for the question ‘Assess the value of William George Blasket’s letter (or Source A) for an historian studying the spirituality of the Anzacs’, a close look at perspective would be needed. A teacher can approach the idea of ‘value’ and ‘limitations’ in a number of ways, but one is to focus on the perspective, purpose, content and context of the source. In this case, it would look like the following:

Using the above information, a response to this question might be:

William George Blasket’s letters are valuable for historians studying the spirituality of the Anzacs as they provides a personal perspective on how faith shaped soldiers’ experiences during World War I. Blasket’s correspondence reveals his strong Methodist beliefs and open enthusiasm for church attendance, which he described as having a “wonderful attraction” even amid the harsh realities of war. This underscores that many Anzacs maintained a connection to their faith, using it as

“A modern-day perspective is often shaped by the available sources of information”

“
... the
embedded-
ness of
spirituality
in Anzac
identity.”

Perspective - Who created the source? - When was it created? - Where was it created? - What is the creator's point of view?	William George Blaskett, Methodist, South Australian 1914–1917 On Active Service overseas His Christian faith informed his decision to participate in WWI.
Purpose - What type of source is it? - Why was it created?	Letters home to family. To inform his family of what he was experiencing. To state his personal opinions on what he saw. To connect emotionally with family on important issues.
Content - What can be learned from the source about the topic being studied?	There were soldiers in WWI who enjoyed attending church (“held a wonderful attraction for me”). There were Anzacs in WWI who believed that God was on the side of ‘Right’ (the Allies) over ‘Might’ (the Germans) and this justified their participation in the war.
Context - What information from one's own knowledge is useful for interpreting the source.	Soldiers such as Blaskett were respected by fellow Anzacs, in part because of their open spirituality. Blaskett was popular and considered to have ‘high moral standing’. Blaskett is not atypical of Anzacs in WWI.
Limitations - Which aspects of the above limit the usefulness of source?	Blaskett's quote does not reflect the range of responses soldiers had about the role of faith and God in wartime.

a source of comfort and strength in difficult times. Blaskett's letters also reflect the common Anzac conviction that the war was a moral crusade, framed as “fighting for Right against Might.” He explicitly links this cause to Christianity, suggesting that true Christians could not ‘shirk’ their duty in such a just conflict. This aligns with the broader wartime narrative shared by many soldiers who saw their service as a practical expression of their faith and moral principles. His writings thus provide insight into how religion justified and motivated participation in the war, illustrating the embeddedness of spirituality in Anzac identity.

Conclusion

For teachers, embracing the contestable nature of the Anzac story—especially regarding spirituality—enriches the classroom. It allows students not just to question prevailing narratives but to empathise with the lived complexities of historical actors and make comparisons between the past and the present. There are a range of sources presented here that can be used to show how historians have selectively highlighted secular aspects while downplaying or omitting spiritual elements. However, soldiers' diaries and letters, chaplain accounts, and recent scholarly works reveal the often-overlooked religious outlooks and experiences of the Anzacs. These sources can be examined in the classroom, with an emphasis on their perspective and context, enabling

students to develop a more complete and nuanced understanding of the Anzac story.

The Anzacs' relationship with religion, like Australia's broader story, resists simple definition; it is dynamic, full of tensions, and evolving. Ultimately, a deeper exploration of the spiritual dimensions in the Anzac legend provides a more truthful understanding of both Australia's past and its ongoing debates over cultural and religious identity. **TEACH**

References

- Bale, C. (2015). *A crowd of witnesses: Epitaphs on first world war Australian war graves*. Longueville Media.
- Bean, C. E. W. (1921). *The story of Anzac, vol 1*. Angus & Robertson.
- Beaumont, J. (1995). *Australia's war 1914–18*. Allen & Unwin.
- Beveridge, S. (1921). Letter. *1DRL0618*. Australian War Memorial, Canberra.
- Black, D. (1931). *Red dust: An Australian trooper in Palestine*. Jonathan Cape.
- Blackwood, D. (1919). Letter. *1DRL619*. Australian War Memorial, Canberra.
- Blaskett, W. (1917). Letter. *1DRL/0130*. Australian War Memorial, Canberra.
- Carey, H. M. (1996). *Believing in Australia: A cultural history of religions*. Allen & Unwin.
- Carey, H. M. (2014). Secularism versus Christianity in Australian history. In C. Hartney (Ed.), *Secularisation: New Historical Perspectives*. Cambridge Scholars Press.
- Chadwick, J. (2020). The Anzacs, religion and god: The spiritual journeys of twenty-seven members of the AIF [Book Review]. *Sabretache*, 61(2), 49–50. <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.335449400187827>
- Crotty, H. (1920). *The vision and the task*. Australian National Council of C.E.M.S.
- Crotty, M. (2009). Teaching Anzac: Fraught territory, teachable moments and professional responsibility. *Agora*, 44(2), 13–17.

- Gallwey, W. D. (1917). Letters. *2DRL/0785*. Australian War Memorial.
- Gammage, B. (1980). *The broken years*. Penguin Books.
- Gladwin, M. (2013). *Captains of the soul: A history of Australian army chaplains*. Big Sky.
- Gladwin, M. (2023). Reading Anzac religion and the sacred: The bible as a central text and artefact of Australian soldiers' experience of the first world war. *Journal of Religious History*, 47(2), 196–221. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9809.12939>
- Gullett, H. C. (1944). The AIF in Sinai and Palestine. Angus & Robertson.
- Inglis, K. (2005). *Sacred places: War memorials in the Australian landscape* (2nd ed.). Melbourne University Press.
- Inglis, K. (2007). Speechmaking in Australia. *The Allan Martin Lecture*.
- Lake, M. L. (2010). How do schoolchildren learn about the spirit of Anzac? In *What's Wrong with Anzac?: The militarisation of Australian History*. NewSouth.
- Lake, M. (2020). *The bible in Australia: A cultural history*. NewSouth.
- Linder, R. D. (2000). *The long tragedy: Australian evangelical Christians and the great war, 1914–1918*. Centre for the Study of Australian Christianity & Open Book.
- Piggin, S., & Linder, R. (2018). *The fountain of public prosperity: Evangelical Christians in Australian history, 1740–1914*. Monash University Press.
- Piggin, S., & Linder, R. (2020). *Attending to the national soul: Evangelical Christians in Australian history 1914–2014*. Monash University Press.
- Possamai, A., & Tittensor, D. (2022). *Religion and change in Australia*. Routledge.
- Putney, C. (2003). *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and sports in protestant America, 1880–1920*. Harvard University Press.
- Reynaud, D. (2018). *Anzac spirituality: The first AIF soldiers speak*. Australian Scholarly.
- Reynaud, D. (2019). *The Anzacs, religion and god: The spiritual journeys of twenty-seven members of the AIF*. Australian Scholarly.
- Seal, G. (2004). *Inventing Anzac: The digger and national mythology*. University of Queensland Press.
- Snape, M. (2005). *God and the British soldier: Religion and the British army in the first and second world wars*. Routledge.
- Thomson, A. (1995). *Anzac memories: Living with the legend*. Oxford University Press.

Author information

Daniel Reynaud is Emeritus Professor at Avondale University. He has published extensively on the Anzacs and Religion, Anzac cinema and Anzac food. He was the inaugural Visiting Historian at the Anzac Memorial, Hyde Park, Sydney, in 2023.

Eva Foster graduated from Avondale University in 2004 and has been teaching History at Oxford Falls Grammar for 11 years. She is passionate about helping students appreciate the complexities of the past through historical debate and critical thinking.

Strengthen your career Free micro-credential

Mentoring a teacher education student?

Advance your knowledge with a free online postgraduate unit*. Receive credit toward a Master of Education degree and learn:

- Mentoring vs Coaching
- How to be an effective mentor
- How to develop a mentoring program
- Reporting practice

*Terms and condition apply

