

‘THAT SACRED BAND OF CRUSADERS:’ THE AIF AS GOD’S WARRIORS

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The notion of the First Australian Imperial Force (AIF) as God’s warriors has some currency in contemporary Christian circles. Evangelist Col Stringer, for example, has written a book championing the role of the Australian Light Horse in the story of the re-establishment of Israel as a nation, labelling them as ‘God’s History Makers,’ a volume that surprised many when it appeared at number 12 on an ABC television most popular books list poll in 2004.² However, the notion is not entirely new. During the Great War itself, many commentators saw the conflict as an instrument in the hands of God. Prominent church leaders saw the war as an event that would improve the righteousness of the nation, allowing Christianity to counter the creeping secularism of Australian society and reassert itself at the head of political and

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2. Col Stringer, *800 Horsemen: God’s History Makers* (Robina Qld: Col Stringer Ministries, 1999); ‘Mystery Man,’ *The Age*, 10 December 2004, <https://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/books/mystery-man-20041210-gdz61c.html>, retrieved 23 July 2018.

moral leadership, a position it had once held in British society, for the betterment of everyone.³

The interaction of Australian religion and the Great War both at home and overseas has been fruitfully explored by scholars such as Michael McKernan, Robert D. Linder, Michael Gladwin, Colin Bale and the present author.⁴ While no church had developed a theology of war, the four major denominations (Anglican, Catholic, Presbyterian and Methodist) tended to view the war through a British-Christian lens, seeing the British Empire as the leading agent of God's will and power on earth. Social Darwinism had so meshed with British Christianity that it was common to view Britain, its people and institutions – especially its Protestantism – as the pinnacle of human evolution, and therefore God's chosen instrument in civilising the world. Thus, the victory of British arms would save civilisation from 'Hunnish' barbarism, be a victory for God and church, and permit British Christianity to continue its dominating mission of lifting lesser mortals, if not to the level of Britishers, then at least to a higher

3. Michael McKernan, *Australian Churches at War: Attitudes and Activities of the Major Churches 1914-1918* (Sydney & Canberra: Catholic Theological Faculty & Australian War Memorial, 1980), 32-39; Robert D. Linder, *The Long Tragedy: Australian Evangelical Christians and the Great War, 1914-1918* (Adelaide: Centre for the Study of Australian Christianity & Openbook, 2000), 72.

4. Michael McKernan, *Australian Churches at War*; Michael McKernan, *Padre: Australian Chaplains in Gallipoli and France*, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986); Robert D. Linder, *The Long Tragedy*; Michael Gladwin, *Captains of the Soul: a History of Australian Army Chaplains*, (Newport, NSW: Big Sky Publishing, 2013); Colin Bale, *A Crowd of Witnesses: Epitaphs on First World War Australian War Graves*, (Haberfield NSW: Longueville Media, 2015); Colin Bale, 'In God We Trust: the impact of the Great War on Religious Belief in Australia,' in *Donald Robinson: Selected Works; Appreciation*, Peter G. Bolt and Mark D. Thompson (eds), (Camperdown NSW: Australian Church Record, 2008); Daniel Reynaud and Jane Fernandez, "'To Thrash the Offending Adam out of Them': The theology of violence in the writings of Great War Anzacs,' in *Secularisation: New Historical Perspectives*, Christopher Hartney (ed.), (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 134-150; Daniel Reynaud, 'Revisiting the secular Anzac: the Anzacs and religion,' *Lucas: An Evangelical History Review*, 2:9 2015, 73-101; Daniel Reynaud, *Anzac Spirituality: The First AIF Soldiers Speak*, (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2018).

plane than that they had previously inhabited. This certainty was somewhat shaken by the stalemate and appalling casualties on the Western Front, leading to another emphasis emerging, that of the war as a punishment from God for the world's evils and, where British casualties were concerned, as specific retribution for the spiritual failings of the British Empire, particularly with regard to secularism. There were those of course, more so among the smaller denominations but also present in the big four, who feared the war would corrupt the world, especially their own adherents, who would be exposed to the vices that especially terrified the Dissenter denominations: alcohol, swearing, sex and gambling. They also feared that wars were intrinsically selfish, therefore incapable of returning a result in the common good.⁵

The phrase 'the common good' had widespread currency during the Great War era. It was even a slogan for Warner's Safe Cure, a popular cure-all medicine, effective against no less than rheumatism, neuralgia, sciatica, blood disorders, indigestion, jaundice, gravel, stone, anemia, gout, lumbago, back ache, biliousness, sick headache, general debility, and bladder troubles.⁶ Warner's appropriation of the phrase is a useful metaphor for its use in society in general: an appeal to 'the common good' was standard rhetoric to justify diverse proposed solutions to no end of problems. For example, some of its uses included such causes as enhanced government power, anti-sectarianism, pacifism, imperial nationalism, 'worldism' which would replace parochial nationalism, and socialism, many of which

5. McKernan, *Australian Churches at War*, 32-39; Linder, *The Long Tragedy*, 72, 75-80, 155.

6. For example, see the advertisement, 'A Common Good,' *Adelaide Daily Herald*, 11 March 1916, 7.

are mutually incompatible goals.⁷ Hence, the notion of 'the common good' is hardly unproblematic, given the plasticity with which it was applied.

Unsurprisingly, the phrase was taken from broader usage and applied by leading figures in the major denominations to Christianity and the war, though what different people meant by 'the common good' in a religious context again could vary. It was most often associated with spiritual renewal, sacrifice, and national/international politics in speeches supporting the war effort. A Catholic newspaper reported a speech 'pointing out the ennobling influence of war' because of 'its incentives to self-sacrifice and heroism.' Of the AIF volunteers, the speaker opined, 'The war spirit has made these men better Christians. Self-denial and devotion to the common good are Christian virtues. To defend your country and your weaker neighbors is to fulfil the commandment, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself".' The speaker went on to contrast this with Germany's war spirit, labelling the latter as driven by modern atheism and pre-Christian paganism rather than Christian altruism.⁸ Catholic Archbishop Michael Kelly made several widely-reported speeches using the phrase 'the common good,' claiming that the war would bring 'unity and brotherhood' by revealing 'how terribly destructive and fatal discord and strife are.' He badged the concept as 'good old fashioned Scriptural phraseology,' as another way of saying 'the Kingdom of God.'⁹

7. 'Government Powers in War Time,' *Adelaide Southern Cross*, 6 August 1915, 10; 'The Stricken Belgians,' *Adelaide Register*, 13 November 1914, 4; 'The Sectarian Devil,' *National Leader*, 30 November 1917, 3; 'To the Day When Men Shall Learn to War no More,' *Brisbane Daily Standard*, 20 November 1916, 2; 'Fighting for the Flag, True Sons of Empire,' *Melbourne Argus*, 25 May 1915, 8; 'Wanted – A New Map Worldism instead of Nationalism,' *Adelaide Daily Herald*, 13 July 1915, 2; 'Socialism and Ethics,' *International Socialist*, 11 August 1917.

8. 'Christianity and the War,' *The Southern Cross*, 5 February 1915, 14.

9. 'The Common Good,' *Spectator and Methodist Chronicle*, 25 July 1917, 788; *Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday 16 December 1916, 13; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 August 1918, 6.

The Geelong Council of Churches used the phrase to declare their support for conscription during the first referendum as 'the imperative duty of every Christian man and woman,' while a Yarra Methodist minister also used it to justify conscription during the second referendum campaign, arguing that 'our privileges have been gained for us by sacrifice of even life itself for the common good,' and the Anglican Bishop of Tasmania similarly argued in favour of conscription for the common good.¹⁰ On the other hand, a letter to the editor argued against conscription on the same principle of the Christian common good, stating that Christianity should always respect minority opinions, or else become tyrants.¹¹

A returned soldier, in taking a local minister to task for his uncharitable comments about a fellow citizen, contrasted the clergyman with the Anzacs, noting that none had done more for the common good than Australia's soldiers, who although they had 'little or no pretense to religion, have become the embodiment of the fundamental principle of Christianity, viz., self-sacrificing for the common good. The man who looks death in the eyes, and, in the high sense of duty, brushes it aside as something unworthy to be considered, acquires a deep and true sense of religion.'¹² A radical British bishop hoped that the war would result in social, economic and political equity with 'brotherhood and fellowship dominant over the principle of selfishness,' while the newly-installed Moderator of the Australian Presbyterian Assembly hoped that an outcome of the war would be an international parliament working for the common

10. 'Geelong Council of Churches,' *Geelong Advertiser*, 26 October 1916, 3; 'Methodists Discuss Referendum,' *Footscray Advertiser*, 8 December 1917, 3; 'A Bishop's Remarks,' *Manilla Express*, 4 November 1916, 4.

11. 'Christians and Conscription,' To the Editor, *Brisbane Daily Standard*, 19 October 1916, 8.

12. 'Sectarian Strife,' Letters to the Editor, *Gippsland Times*, 15 August 1918, 3.

good, as well as reviving churches which had become 'too formal,' with 'worldly prosperity' eclipsing 'true religion.'¹³

The Anzacs themselves naturally brought with them on enlistment the attitudes they had formed as civilians, but once in uniform they were subject to circumstances denied the churches at home, namely the experience of combat itself. This paper asks, how did Anzacs see their own role in the war with regard to the common good? Did the front line change the way they constructed their role as Christians, and the role of Christianity in society at large? Although the phrase 'the common good' is virtually never found in Anzac writings, the concept is implicit in many comments, blending together various facets which can be discerned through their diaries and letters. At the same time, their experience of the horrific casualties and lack of progress in the war also led to some questioning of God's role in the war and whether their participation, or even the war itself, was in fact for the common good.

Righteous warriors

Many Anzacs saw themselves and their fellows as righteous warriors, or at least, warriors in a righteous cause. A devout Anglican captain, not limiting the righteous to merely the Australians or British, wrote, 'it seems to me that the heavens are half opened, and that, even as did St John in the Apocalypse, our enchanted eyes look on those who were marked on the forehead servants of God, and who form one immense throng from all nations, tribes, peoples and tongues. They have fought the good fight, they will have the reward of valiant soldiers.... Forward Champions of Right, of Justice, of Liberty and of Christian Civilisation! By the King Eternal, Sovereign Master of events, they form an immense army of all nations, tribes,

13. 'Bishop Gore and the Proper Results of War: Ideals for the Nation,' *Malvern Standard*, 19 February 1916, 5; 'Presbyterian Assembly, Moderator's Address,' *Maitland Daily Mercury*, 10 May 1916, 3.

peoples and tongues.'¹⁴ Presbyterian Chaplain Ernest Merrington, leading an interdenominational communion service, wrote of the 'feeling of sacred comradeship, not limited to earth, [which] swept over us. Those grimy and gory hands which lay open to receive the Bread were ennobled in this service by the Spirit of the Master.'¹⁵ A Presbyterian sapper wrote that 'as a living member of that sacred band of Crusaders, I shall regard it as a Heaven-sent privilege, for all time, to have been given the opportunity of serving with, to have once been able to write after my humble name, those glorious letters, emblazoned with success and history, A.I.F.'¹⁶

A number of Anzacs positioned their work in terms of sacrifice, with some speaking of its redemptive powers. Others spoke in the related language of martyrdom, having a sanctifying effect on the land over which they fought. Roman Catholic Chaplain Thomas Mullins used this kind of language when he wrote of celebrating Mass for soldiers 'who had poured forth the fullest measure of their lifeblood on the sands of Gallipoli.'¹⁷ A Methodist Home Missionary labelled his enlistment as 'a sacrifice on behalf of my country.'¹⁸ Merrington wrote of soldiers in Egypt 'feeling the thrill of their comrades' noble sacrifices at the Dardanelles,' writing that the Anzacs saved the land 'made sacred by their brothers' blood and their comrades' graves.' He spoke of soldiers 'singing the great hymns of Christendom with full and resonant voices, which filled the valleys of the battle-field

14. Thomas Alexander White, diary, 1 November 1918, MLMSS 965, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, Sydney.

15. Ernest Merrington, 'With The Anzacs 1914-15,' unpublished manuscript, 147, 3DRL 3237, Australian War Memorial Archives, Canberra.

16. Noel Glendenning Linton, diary, 4 August 1918, MLMSS 1096, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, Sydney.

17. 'An account by Chaplain the Rev T. Mullins, MC, 4th Light Horse Brigade AIF,' 1DRL 522, Australian War Memorial Archives, Canberra.

18. George Henry Davies, diary, 21 January 1916, 2DRL 0789, Australian War Memorial Archives, Canberra.

with the glorious strains of the triumph of Divine Love and Life over sin and death.¹⁹ A Methodist whose family strongly opposed his enlistment finally signed up after a long spiritual struggle, weighing the arguments each way, declaring to his mother that his conscience led him to enlist, fighting for the right, despite the ambiguities of biblical references about the use of violence.²⁰

Combative Anglican theologian Everard Digges La Touche, who served as an officer at Gallipoli, was convinced of the positive role of the Anzacs in fulfilling the will of God:

‘Meanwhile we go through to take their places and to secure that they have not died in vain “whose faith follow considering the end of their conversation, Jesus Christ, the same yesterday and today and forever”.... It is in some ways a solemn thing to be going to the Front, where so many have done their duty even unto death, but the joy and anticipation of being with Christ makes the peril to life almost delightful.... each do our duty in the sight of God and Man if Christ’s flag is to be kept flying in European life. The Lord cover our heads in the day of battle and teach our hands to war and our fingers to fight.’

He was as good as his word, lasting a single day at Lone Pine on 6 August 1915, when he refused treatment for his wounds in case it should block movement in the crowded captured Turkish trench.²¹

Some saw their faith as empowering them to more effective military service. The priest who officiated at the funeral of Lieutenant Colonel

19. Merrington, ‘With the Anzacs,’ 43, 89, 155.

20. Frederick Eales Brown, memoir, 23 May 1915, MSS1360, Australian War Memorial Archives, Canberra.

21. Everard Digges La Touche, diary, n.d., circa mid 1915, 1DRL 0243, Australian War Memorial Archives, Canberra.

Ignatius Norris credited the colonel’s faith with providing the kind of comfort that permitted him to execute his command with calm assurance.²² Another battalion commander, also later killed in action, wrote a moving poem about communion in the trenches, whose final stanza ran: ‘They leave, each strengthened in his frame/Their spirits nourished for the fight/Assured as by a Living Flame/Whatever befalls them will be Right.’²³ Yet another officer credited his faith with empowering him with endurance and to remain ‘cheery before the men’ during the hellish Battle of Pozieres in July 1916.²⁴

Many soldiers found moral strength in the association of faith and war, creating a clear mandate for their unpleasant task. A chaplain cleverly used Jeremiah’s metaphor of the Divine Potter (Jeremiah 18: 6-10) to reach a satisfying conclusion for one soldier in illustrating ‘the folly of a nation [Germany] in putting God in the background.’²⁵ Another found a sermon appealing to the men to serve both God and their country ‘most impressive and appreciated by all.’²⁶ Discouraged at times, a man wrote, ‘Religion comes home with redoubled force and meaning here in the camp and field. There is so much that tends to get a man down and worry him that a religion which is brimful of hope and cheerfulness, as is ours, is indispensable.’²⁷

22. Robin S. Corfield. *Don’t forget me Cobber: The Battle of Fromelles*. Updated ed. (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2009), 141.

23. Richard Armstrong Crouch, papers, PRMF 0015, Australian War Memorial Archives, Canberra.

24. Anon, letter in the file of Malcolm John Bernard Cotton, 3DRL 3071, Australian War Memorial Archives, Canberra.

25. Hector Brewer, diary, 19 August 1917, MLMSS 1300, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, Sydney.

26. William Swindells, diary, 31 January 1915, PR 00251, Australian War Memorial Archives, Canberra.

27. Edwin John Davidson ‘Soldier’s Letter,’ *Gippsland Times*, 8 April 1918, 3.

Some soldiers saw their contribution to the common good to apply not so much to their actions against the enemy but as a force of righteousness among their less virtuous fellow Anzacs. Encouraged to enlist by a friend because he was reliable, a non-drinker and non-smoker, one man joined because, 'as a Christian should put self and own interests last,' he felt that he 'might be used of God even in such a game as this' as his Christian influence would provide valuable leavening in the Army where such influences were 'all too scarce.'²⁸ Much the same was said about stretcher-bearer Ronald Pittendrigh, a Methodist minister who died of his wounds alongside Chaplain Andrew Gillison after a failed attempt to rescue a wounded man in No-Man's-Land on Gallipoli. A Methodist journal recalled, 'One of the motives which moved him was the conviction that he might be of some service to his fellow soldiers by living among them, sharing their hardships and dangers, and showing what a Christian life was before their eyes, while, at the same time, seizing every opportunity of winning them for Christ.'²⁹ Similarly, a devoutly Christian young platoon commander killed at Fromelles was remembered for both his physical and moral courage. 'I am speaking very sincere words when I say that the men under his command would be better men as well as better soldiers because of his influence,' wrote a Y.M.C.A. official to his parents.³⁰ Prominent Anglo-Catholic leader Canon David Garland mentored a band of chaplain-clergy and soldier-laity who saw their contribution to Anzac righteousness more narrowly, as upholding sacramental Anglo-Catholicism against the invading tide of tainted

28. Albert Ernest Coates, diary, 11 August 1914, *The Volunteer: The Diaries and Letters of Albert E. Coates. No. 23 – 7th Btn., 1st A.I.F. First World War 1914-18*, Winifred Gherardin and Walter Gherardi (eds.), (Melbourne: W. Graphics, 1995).

29. 'In Memoriam,' *The Methodist*, 25 September 1915, 2.

30. Eric Harding Chinner papers, 12 August 1916, 1DRLO200, Australian War Memorial Archives, Canberra.

German dissenting 'protestantism,' [sic] and the vices of sex and alcohol among their fellow soldiers.³¹

God on our side in a righteous cause

The notion of 'God on our side' was common to many forces in the Great War, not least the Prussian forces within the German army, whose belt buckles carried the phrase 'Gott Mit Uns' (God with Us). Many members of the AIF found the belief that God was on the Allied side empowering. One soldier attributed his own military prowess to a Greater Power guiding him, feeling that those who fought for their religion were usually hard to defeat.³² Another faced 'great opposition' at home to enlisting but honestly looked forward 'to taking a further active part in the war until it has a glorious conclusion with the help of God and His blessing.'³³ A devout officer wrote home with confidence, 'I read the [newspaper] cutting about the righteousness of war with great interest. You know, dearies, that were it not for the fact that I know He is on the side of the Allies I would not be able to fight.... and it is because I *know* He is fighting for us that I feel He will bless me and guide me in my hour of trial.'³⁴ Writing to Garland, a soldier enthused, 'You can scarcely imagine how glad I am to have the honour of being able to assist our boys in striking a blow for our Empire, in a cause I feel that God approves.'³⁵

31. David Garland, letters, 18 January 1916, 12 October 1917, 4 December 1917; Thomas Hely-Wilson, letter, 29 September 1916; John Collum, letter, 24 October 1916; Verdi Schwinghammer, letters, 29 December 1916, 12 July 1917, Horace Watkins, 13 July 1917, Canon David John Garland Papers 1915-1918; 1934, OM71-51, State Library of Queensland, Brisbane; William Maitland Woods, letter, 21 February 1916, OM74 Maitland Woods Papers 1915-1916 State Library of Queensland.

32. Michael Collins, 'A Soldier's Letter,' *Camp Chronicle*, 4 October 1917, 9.

33. Lennox Ross Owen Douglas, diary, 14 November 1915, 31 December 1915, MLMSS 5480, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, Sydney.

34. Chinner, undated letter, 1915; letter, 4 June 1916.

35. W. J. Leacock, letter, 24 July 1916, Canon David John Garland Papers.

Soldiers expressed their sense of God being on their side by speaking of the righteousness of the Allied participation in the conflict, though sometimes this carried with it an awareness of the ambiguity of the evidence, given the lack of Allied progress. One soldier claimed spiritual discernment which allowed him to see what was otherwise obscured by circumstances. 'We are now experiencing one of the many periods of Divine silence,' he wrote. 'Evil seems to be victorious, but the Christian is assured of the ultimate triumph of right over so-called might. The natural man cannot understand these things; they are foolishness with him; they are spiritually discerned. What the microscope is to the scientist faith is to the Christian.'³⁶ Another man blamed 'selfish and grasping' men for the war. His own participation was his contribution to righting the wrong, and restoring humanity's 'upward and onward' spiritual progress. 'Will the world be better if the Allies win this war?' he asked rhetorically. 'Yes if their peoples will serve the Living Christ in whom is the only source of true abiding happiness.'³⁷

A chaplain labelled the war as Armageddon, prompting an officer to write, 'However that is what we are here for, to take our share in the great struggle of the world for right and freedom.'³⁸ Another man found strength in moral certainty at a time when the German spring offensives of 1918 made it appear that the war had taken a dramatic turn for the worse. 'Facing matters from a Christian viewpoint, overlooking what in civil life would well-nigh be called intolerable, and always trusting in the final victory of right over wrong, all helps a man to face the music.'³⁹

36. Foster Hunter, letter, 8 October 1916, 1DRL 0365, Australian War Memorial Archives, Canberra. ~

37. Davies, diary, 21 January 1916.

38. Robert Geoffrey Horniman, letter, 22 October 1916, 1DRL 0358, Australian War Memorial Archives, Canberra.

39. Davidson 'Soldier's Letter,' 3.

One soldier's motivation was driven not by revenge but by 'a smoldering resentment against the Demon that had brought this state of things about.' He clung to a divine perspective which allowed him to resolve superficial tensions in the world's situation. 'To the ignorant or casual observer, all seems chaos, but behind it all lies the inflexible resolve for the regulation and order of the World's greatest organisation [the British Empire], backed by the laws of God, the voice of Liberty, immutable Faith, and the demands of the world's organised Christian Nations'⁴⁰ Another protested the condemnation he received from a pacifist in his home church. 'I may be biased, but it seems to me, that fighting for Right against Might, is a very practical form of Christianity.'⁴¹

God cleansing the earth and punishing evil

Many Anzacs of faith hoped that the war would bring about a revival of Christianity and a new Christian Australia. The war was a God-driven means of purification. The first target of this purification was Imperial Germany, the principal scapegoat for Anzac anger against its alleged atrocities. A chaplain wrote of the 'monstrous iniquity' of Germany.⁴² An officer heard with approval a sermon condemning Germany over the sinking of the *Lusitania* which, he said, '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,' he told his

40. Jim Maxwell, 'Soldiers' Letters,' *Chronicle and North Coast Advertiser*, 11 October 1918, 5.

41. William George Blaskett, letter, 18 April 1916, 1DRL 0130, Australian War Memorial Archives, Canberra.

42. Albert Bladen, 'An Anzac's Tracks,' unpublished M/S, PR 01752, Australian War Memorial, Canberra.

family.⁴³ Another sermon helped him find an appropriate attitude to accompany his desire for punishment for Germany. Hearing the phrase, 'I love the German so much that I have come out here to help thrash the offending Adam out of him,' he added, '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.'⁴⁴ Unfortunately, he did not live to do so, being killed at his first battle at Fromelles in July 1916. Parenthetically, we might note that a German corporal present at the same battle utterly failed to have the offending Adam thrashed out of him, and went on to launch the holocaust of the Second World War in vengeance for the wrongs he perceived Germany had suffered in the First.

One man hoped to avenge a friend, and help to 'blot out' German actions in Belgium, Serbia and Gallipoli – if God permits.⁴⁵ Another soldier claimed to be 'quite unconcerned' about being killed, as he would simply end up in a happier world. Instead, his focus was that, 'While I am in this world I must fight for justice and destroy the wicked even though I risk my life in doing so. I was born of this nature and it is impossible to do otherwise.'⁴⁶

Quoting an anti-pacifist poem, a soldier approved of its lines, 'The cannon are God's teachers/When times are ripe for war.'⁴⁷ 'I feel

43. Chinner, letter, n.d., circa April 1915.

44. Chinner, letter, 4 June 1916.

45. Harold Edwin Salisbury Armitage, diary, 5 April 1916, 1DRL 0053, Australian War Memorial Archives, Canberra.

46. Wilfred Denver Gallwey, letter, 24 June 1917, 2DRL 0785, Australian War Memorial Archives, Canberra.

47. Malcolm Shore Stanley, diary, 12 July 1918, MLMSS 3043, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, Sydney.

confident that the lessons learnt during this war will last, and have a refining influence on the world, so that, after all the pain and anxiety, people will love more and live better than they could have done had not this chastisement been brought on us,' wrote another, with sadly misplaced optimism.⁴⁸ A third asked, 'Will the world be better if the Allies win this war? Yes if their peoples will serve the Living Christ in whom is the only source of true abiding happiness.... God's hand is in all of this, there is an All Powerful Will at work around us, and He rules for righteousness and freedom. Woe to those who work iniquity, for their path is the path of destruction.'⁴⁹ Another concurred, arguing that, 'This war is chastening the earth and is perhaps God's judgement on us for drifting into idle and careless ways.'⁵⁰

This chastening and cleansing was accomplished not simply by the destruction of those idle and careless people. Ironically, it could also take place through the death of the righteous. A chaplain characterised the death of a young officer to his parents as having died for the common good. 'He indeed has offered his life as a sacrifice in order to purify a corrupt nation.'⁵¹ However, the death of godly soldiers caused some soul-searching among other godly survivors. How could the death of such obviously upright men be for the common good? One man wrestled with the death in action of his gifted, believing cousin, before finally enlisting himself.⁵² Another wrote sadly of his best friend, 'Goodbye Bert. You were one of the real good sort. Your character and moral temperament were an example to us all. Your life was given for a righteous cause. May God comfort your own dear

48. Godfrey McRae, 'Soldiers' Letters,' *The Bacchus Marsh Express*, 1 December 1917, 3.

49. Davies, letter, n.d., circa December 1916.

50. Geoffrey Gordon McCrae, letter, 7 September 1915, 1DRL 0427, Australian War Memorial, Canberra.

51. Chaplain Ward to Eric Harding Chinner's parents, 7 December 1916, 1DRL0200, Australian War Memorial Archives, Canberra.

52. Brown, memoir, n.d.

ones in the hour of darkness and distress. May they realise that you died fighting in freedom's cause. You lived for the right and you died upholding justice and purity, the lovely grace which the Hun would besmirch.⁵³ A soldier, struggling with why one of the best should die when others he knew were false, wrote to the grieving parents of his friend, 'It is hard that poor old Will should go, and others stay, but God moves in mysterious ways.'⁵⁴ One was sobered by the realization that 'three of the best men in the unit' had died, members of a closely-bonded Christian fellowship. He concluded, 'There is food for thought and conjecture in that.'⁵⁵

Call to righteousness

One scholar has written that the churches' 'enthusiastic embrace of the challenge of war derives in great part from churchmen's desire for some event that would shake Australians from their indifference and awaken them to the Christian realities.'⁵⁶ Many soldiers would have agreed with this. A chaplain who 'touched on the need of unity, the high ideals we are fighting for,' found resonance with one of his listeners.⁵⁷ Another hungrily followed stories in the press about religion in the trenches, 'searching for signs of an awakening interest in the things that meant most to me.' While the reports were contradictory, he got the sense that men at the front were praying more. 'That was interesting and seemed to show that God must be

53. James Bell, diary, 18 July 1916, MLMSS 1267, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, Sydney.

54. Harold Ward, letter to parents of William George Blaskett, 18 April 1917, 1DRL0130, Australian War Memorial Archives, Canberra.

55. Oliver Lucien Samuel Holt, diary, 16 August 1918, MLMSS 1986, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, Sydney.

56. McKernan, *Australian Churches at War*, 8.

57. John Davison Wilson, diary, 16 October 1916, MLMSS 3057, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, Sydney.

in the thick of things with them. Could it be that this was really a crusade in which God was using our aims to purge the world of international immorality?'⁵⁸

Another soldier framed the call to righteousness in imperial terms, believing that they 'would emerge as an empire stronger and having learnt the lesson of universal brotherhood all the world over, and the principles laid down by the Greatest Teacher who ever trod the earth.'⁵⁹ A soldier recorded a night of heavy shelling that changed the attitude of his friend. "'Well Bill!,' said the friend, 'Last night has put the fear of God into me; after this, I am going, to be religious.'" The soldier added, 'I wish some such shock could be spread over the world, and show us how we are actually living; a lot of us would soon change for the better.'⁶⁰ Another recorded the prayer of a Congregationalist minister who instead of praying for victory, asked that an unworthy Britain might become worthy.⁶¹ Another applied the same standard to Australia, noting the 'high' aims and objectives of the nation, then asking, 'but in what way does the country morally live up to them.'⁶² One man became tangled in argument with a fellow soldier over the relationship between war, army and church after he insisted that Australians 'were drifting too far from God. Souter said that it was bad to have too much church in the army, so we were pretty lively.'⁶³

58. Brown, memoir, n.d.

59. W. Martin, 'Soldiers' Letters,' *Chronicle and North Coast Advertiser*, 2 February 1918, 3.

60. Anon, 'Soldiers' Letters,' *Manilla Express*, 2 September 1916, 4.

61. Brown, memoir, 5 April 1918.

62. Thomas Clair Whiteside, letters, 28 March 1918, *A Valley in France: Cpl Thomas Clair Whiteside 59th Battalion, Infantry. WWI Letters to His Parents and Sister While on Active Service from Egypt, France and Great Britain. 1915-1918*, Elizabeth Whiteside (ed.), (Beaconsfield, Vic- Elizabeth Whiteside, 1999).

63. John Gotch Ridley, diary, 19 January 1916, *Born to be a Soldier: War Diary of Lieutenant John G. Ridley MC. World War I 1914-1918*, (Sydney: Baptist Historical Society of New South Wales, 2010).

One worried that the lax moral state of his fellow soldiers would affect the outcome of the war. 'How can Britain expect to be the "King of Nations" when things are corrupt and rotten in its army?... The lessons this war is supposed to bring home to us has not borne fruit yet apparently.'⁶⁴ Approving of a chaplain's sermon to the same effect, another wrote, 'He told us plainly that our prayers for Divine help went for little indeed while so many acted as they were acting now. He said God will not prosper our cause if we do not attempt to deserve His favour.'⁶⁵

The doubters

As an all-volunteer force, self-selection tended to exclude from the AIF those men who did not see participation in the war in a positive light. One Anzac carried on a debate by mail with a friend, and other members of his home congregation, on the issue of the war. 'He reckons that going to the war is not in keeping with Christianity,' he wrote. 'Poor old Jack. He is a much better Christian than I am, but I don't think he was right in his arguments.'⁶⁶ Yet some Anzacs themselves voiced outright opposition to the association of God with the war. The son of a clergyman, who rejected his father's faith, along with faith in governments and institutions, nevertheless argued 'And yet I go to join in it, believing that the only hope for the salvation of the world is a speedy victory for the Allies.'⁶⁷ He did not need

64. Harrie Joseph Cave, Letter, 28 April 1917, MLMSS 1224, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, Sydney.

65. William John Salter, letter, 7 November 1915, in Richard Ely, *At the Edge of Time: War Letters from an Australian Private Soldier, 1915-1916. With reflections on William Salter's earlier and later life, and command assumptions*, Richard Ely, (North Melbourne: Dissenters Press, in conjunction with The Baptist Historical Society of Victoria, 2016), 19.

66. Percy Ellsmere Smythe, diary, 29 May 1915, PRO 1463, Australian War Memorial Archives, Canberra.

67. John Alexander Raws, 12 July 1915, 2DRLO481, Australian War Memorial Archives, Canberra.

Christianity in order to argue that his actions were for the common good. Another spiritually conflicted man who was also motivated by the common good was less persuaded by religious arguments. He was annoyed over a sermon which gave a 'one-sided version of Britain's righteousness in taking the part of the weaker nations in the present war,' and prayers for Allied victory, given how morally tainted the Allies were, emphatically rejecting the status of religion in having any moral claims in the conflict.⁶⁸ An active Christian, in discussion with a nurse during a hospital stay, rejected a theology of war as divine judgment and purification, stating, 'She is a bit religious, too, and stated she thought the war was due to the sins in the world. Did I argue!'⁶⁹

The effectiveness of the war as a spiritual shaper

The hopes of so many Christians that the war would prove to be the catalyst for national spiritual revival were sadly dashed. Indeed, war appears to have had little net spiritual impact on even just the AIF, who were most subjected to its impact. While action led some soldiers to reconsider things eternal, on the whole its effect was at best neutral, if not negative. There is evidence of substantial attendance at religious services prior to battles, especially the first battles, and optimistic reports declared that the Anzacs were turning to God. An Anglican bishop chaplain wrote from France of 'a great stirring of the life of the Church and a passionate desire especially among the younger men for reform and reconstruction,' predicting 'revolutionary

68. Richards, diary, 6 September 1914, 22 December 1914.

69. Eric Sydney Evans, diary, 12 August 1917, *So Far From Home: the remarkable diaries of Eric Evans, an Australian soldier during World War I*, Patrick Wilson (ed.), (Sydney: Kangaroo Press 2002).

changes,' while another chaplain claimed 'that the war had not shaken soldiers' faith in God, but had rather increased it.'⁷⁰

The testimony of individual soldiers shows that combat did have this effect on some. One wrote, 'When one is in the line, and the shells are falling close to us, it makes one think about our Heavenly Father.' 'Why one can't help but believe in God after going through one or [indecipherable] scraps and never knowing whose going up next,' said another, while the sight of a body torn apart in battle shocked a third into turning to prayer.⁷¹

While individuals experienced a move towards God, many others found the effect to be the opposite. A more realistic chaplain than those quoted above recognized that soldiering was 'not by any means the most regenerating force, concluding that 'militarism has no ethical value.'⁷² A couple of soldiers wrote extended analyses of the relationship between the war and faith, one concluding that the evidence was at best 'hard to define,' while the other was adamant that 'war, instead of helping to raise the people to higher moral principles, has a damning influence.'⁷³ A number wrote of the damaging effect the war had on their faith, labelling Christianity as 'a hollow mockery,' 'a disgrace to Christianity,' and 'a farce.'⁷⁴ The memoirs of a light

70. George Merrick Long, 'Church Reform: Views of the Soldiers,' *Brisbane Daily Mail*, 14 October 1918, 4; 'Wartime intercession,' *The Register* (SA), 1 January 1917, 6.

71. Murdock McIntyre, 'Soldiers' Letters,' *The Horsham Times*, 24 September 1918, 7; Frederick Harold Vick, letter, 8 August 1917, MLMSS 3051, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, Sydney; Richard Keith Phillips, diary, n.d., circa 25-26 April 1915, PR04143, Australian War Memorial Archives, Canberra.

72. Frederick Humphery, 'Letters from the Front,' *Australian Christian Commonwealth*, 5 January 1917, 14.

73. Brown, memoir, 6 October 1916; Whiteside, letters, 3 August 1917.

74. John Baillie, diary, 7 December 1917, MLMSS 7569, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, Sydney; Langford Wellman Colley-Priest, diary, 19-22 July 1916, MLMSS 2439, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, Sydney; Archie Albert Barwick, diary, 15 May 1916, MLMSS 1493, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, Sydney.

horseman offered extended philosophical reflection, tracing his journey of 'slowly sinking into a morass of uncertainty and doubt' about Christianity as a result of the war.⁷⁵ One soldier described his spiritual state after the experience of war as being 'a complete agnostic,' while another twice bitterly described God as laughing sarcastically in the face of the war's horrors.⁷⁶ Another insisted that, 'contrary to what we all anticipated, the imminence of death and uncertainty of life on active service does not make men think more of religion and its consolations.... Military service does *not* tend to make a man more religious but on the contrary makes many forget the influences under which they lived their former ideals and has in an alarming number of cases an undermining influence on their morals.'⁷⁷ Based on the evidence, it appears that the war was counterproductive in expanding Christianity's role in achieving the common good.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that many believing Anzacs saw themselves as contributing to the common good through their participation in the war. Their first contribution was through combating the evil of Hunnish aggression, which was portrayed as a pagan assault on civilized European Christian society. Even the death in battle of righteous Anzacs could be constructed as a contribution to the common good, a sacrifice, implicitly akin to the sacrifice of the innocent Christ on the cross, helping to bring peace to a world that had neglected God. Secondly, Christian Anzacs saw themselves as

75. Donald Black, *Red Dust: An Australian Trooper in Palestine* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1931), 62-65, 96-100, 287.

76. Alice Ross-King, diary, n.d., circa early 1918, PR 02082, Australian War Memorial Archives, Canberra; Aubrey Roy Liddon Wiltshire, diary, 9 August 1916, 19 May 1918, MLMSS 3058, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, Sydney.

77. Wilfred Evans, letter, 6 December 1916, 2DRL 0014, Australian War Memorial Archives, Canberra.

a leavening influence for good on the mass of Anzacs who were not committed Christians. In this regard, they did not differ greatly from the expressed opinions of church leaders at home.

Similarly, some Anzac diaries and letters held, in common with church leaders in Australia, the view of the war as God's refining fire to purge the world of its lax spiritual state and a call to national righteousness. But, ground down by the realities of war, other Christian Anzacs also recognized that the simple association of war as God's instrument in achieving righteousness was not sustainable. This was increasingly evident in the impact of the war on their fellow Anzac non-believers, who showed little sign of collective movement to active Christianity propelled by their wartime experiences, although some noted the paradox of secular men exhibiting the highest Christian virtues of self-sacrificing love for their fellows.⁷⁸

There can be no doubt that the experience of the horrors of the trenches sharpened the focus of the Anzacs, but it did not produce an equally unified understanding of the meaning of their participation in the war with reference to the common good. At one end of the spectrum of responses were those who still saw the war in binary spiritual terms, a crusade against Hunnish barbarity, a war to save civilization – which was synonymous with Christianity and with Britishness – and for whom the Anzacs were shining knights, 'the sacred band of Crusaders.' Then there were various shades of negotiation with one or more of those concepts. The Hun was perhaps not the blackest shade of evil, maybe the Anzacs were not that shiny, nor were the three facets of British Christian civilization necessarily untarnished. Further along were those who refused to glorify either the Allied cause or Christianity. There were also those who were happy to glorify the Anzacs, but strictly in secular Australian terms, shorn of

78. Sidney Beveridge, papers, 1DRL0618, Australian War Memorial Archives, Canberra; James Gault, *Padre Gault's Stunt Book* (London: Epworth Press), 173-175.

their ill-fitting Christian and/or Imperial garb. And finally, there were those who saw the war as producing only evil outcomes – a betrayal by existing political, religious and social institutions unmasked by the senseless slaughter they had created and championed, an old order which needed to be razed, replaced by a new society free of class, politics and religion. The post-war legacy of Anzac was to be disputed between these various factions, the Imperial triumphalists, the left-wing nationalist republicans and those who experienced the war as disillusionment with the Nineteenth Century narrative of the march of human progress. The Imperial triumphalists won the battle for the Anzac legacy, but Christianity came to be disassociated from the victory, leaving the impression of an exclusively secular Anzac legend from which Christianity has largely been written out. Yet the fact remains that for many Anzacs, their motivation for fighting was based on a notion of the common good, of which Christianity was an intrinsic, though often tacit, element of the narrative.