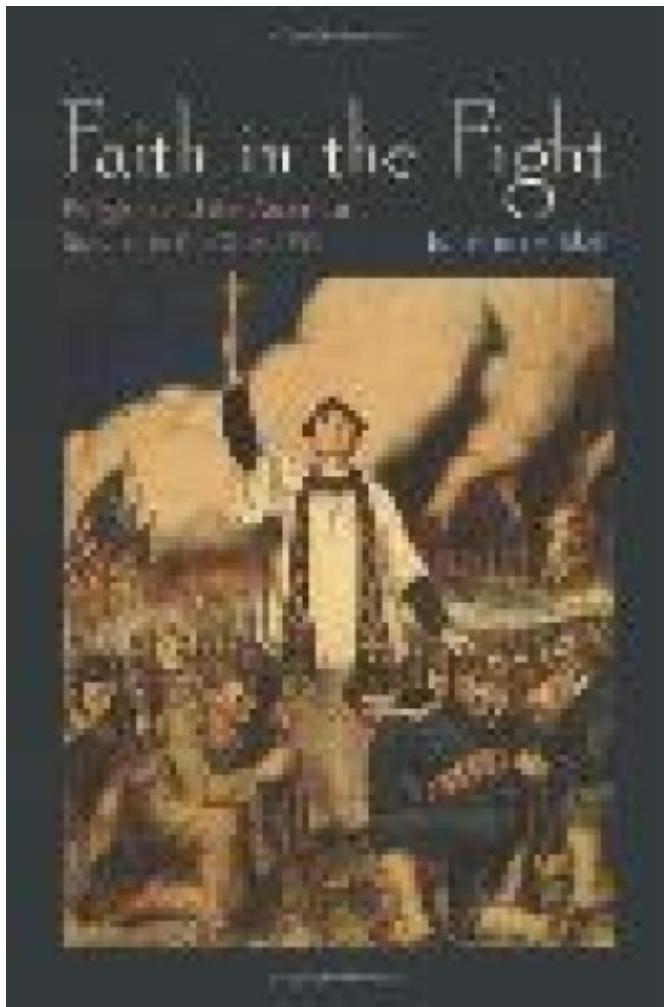


The Great (and holy) War

By [Matthew Avery Sutton](#) in the [June 29, 2010](#) issue

In Review



Faith in the Fight: Religion and the American Soldier in the Great War

Jonathan H. Ebel
Princeton University Press

In the popular World War I protest jingle “I Didn’t Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier,” a heartbroken mother laments, “I didn’t raise my boy to be a soldier / I brought him up to be my pride and joy. / Who dares to place a musket on his shoulder / To shoot some other mother’s darling boy?”

Jonathan H. Ebel has an answer for this mother: God did it.

Or at least American soldiers thought that God had done it. The doughboys believed that God had placed machine guns in their hands, tanks under their command and airplanes at their disposal to wage a holy war, one that would result in the United States’ ultimate triumph.

Ebel, a former intelligence officer in the U.S. Navy and now an assistant professor of religious studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, focuses on the faith at the root of soldiers’ and war workers’ experiences in World War I. He describes “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”—which, he explains, “provided a vocabulary” that made the war meaningful while the war “provided an arena in which faith could be lived out, tested, and animated.” Religion, Ebel found, “did a great deal of the work needed to romanticize war, and allowed many soldiers to ignore or glorify war’s horrors.” In other words, for good or for ill, Christianity helped soldiers and war workers survive, understand and wage war.

Although most Americans believe that World War II, with its righteous cause and decisive victory, best represents the heroic U.S. military tradition, Ebel sees its predecessor as “prototypical.” “Its ambiguities, its inconclusive outcomes, and its violent ripple effect” established the “rule to which Korea, Vietnam, Somalia and, so far, Afghanistan and Iraq have conformed.” The “Good War,” in contrast, is the anomaly.

To support his arguments, Ebel analyzes the writings of over 300 soldiers and war workers—male and female, black and white, Protestant and Catholic—using diaries, memoirs, letters and surveys. He found remarkable similarities in their responses to the war. For most, the conflict represented a battle for redemption. Soldiers and volunteers were willing to kill and to die because they believed that the war had tremendous significance. An Allied victory, they hoped, would transform the world as a whole, making it (in the words of President Woodrow Wilson) “safe for democracy.”

The fight also had the potential to redeem the nation and even individual soldiers. The men and women on the front lines, Ebel says, saw the “war’s violence as capable of achieving cosmic, national, and individual good.”

The book also explores soldiers’ and workers’ reactions to the massive violence of the fight, their interpretations of death, dying, heaven and the afterlife, and the unique experiences of two particular groups serving in Europe—African Americans and women. Although African Americans saw the war as ripe with redemptive potential, they also encountered more directly than any other group how disillusioning the war could be. While the president enthusiastically rallied the troops to defend democracy, African Americans experienced little democracy at home or in the service. Competing constructions of masculinity and femininity are also central to Ebel’s narrative. He weaves the voices of women—especially war workers—throughout the narrative, showing how gender differences were employed by both sexes to frame their understandings of the battles they fought or witnessed.

At the end of the book, Ebel turns briefly to the postwar period, examining the rise of the American Legion and its marriage of hyperpatriotism and faith. This is perhaps the most troubling of the phenomena he describes. “American veterans,” Ebel writes, “imagined that the forces of good were pitted against the forces of evil in an epic post-war struggle. . . . They found new enemies: communists, socialists, pacifists, and moralists—whose very existence threatened the nation.” Rather than leading to more democracy at home and abroad, soldiers’ faith in the Great War helped spark the repressive atmosphere and witch hunts of the early 1920s.

One of *Faith in the Fight*’s great strengths is its attention to the voices of the men and women on the front lines. Ebel believes “that there is something to be learned by working through the religiousness of war from the inside out . . . by studying the religious thoughts and lives of soldiers and war workers.” He beautifully integrates quotes throughout the narrative, allowing readers to feel and hear the voices of those serving abroad. But there is a downside to this approach. At times Ebel might have better contextualized the sources he draws from. It is unclear which of his subjects’ ideas and interpretations were born in the trenches, which represented longstanding U.S. civil religion, and which reflected the effectiveness of the federal government’s powerful propagandizing Committee on Public Information.

Ebel has an answer to this criticism: “Soldiers accepted and repeated official and elite pronouncements on the war . . . not because those pronouncements were

forced on them, but because they corresponded well to soldiers' prewar worldviews, mythic imaginations, and religiously informed understandings of their task." Maybe. But this is something that Ebel asserts rather than something that he demonstrates.

Ebel concludes with the bold and un flinching argument that for Americans, Christianity was a fundamental cause of the Great War:

It is hard for me to imagine the broad-based enthusiastic response to Wilson's draft call, the violence against . . . "subversives" and "hyphenates," the adoption of such demonizing rhetoric and imagery, and soldiers' enduring enthusiasm for "scrapping," without the strong involvement of religious discourse and symbol, the powerful pull of religion's emotions for the nation, and a religiously informed sense . . . of America's responsibility to set things right.

According to Ebel, World War I set bad precedents for subsequent misguided wars, and soldiers' Christian faith is what helped make it possible. This is not a happy story, but it is not intended to be. Unlike the war of redemption that soldiers and war workers thought they were waging, this was in fact a tragic struggle.

Faith in the Fight helps us better understand the relationship between religion and war in the not-so-distant American past. It is also a book that illustrates the dangers inherent in the American penchant for sanctifying state violence. As Ebel masterfully demonstrates, Americans would do well to abandon a little of their faith in the fight.