

Died In Vain?

Did the First World War Soldiers Die in Vain?

This month, appropriately, has seen the commemorations of the beginning of the First World War come to a climax. Everywhere, the conflict has been the subject of national and local events, and much activity in the media (various discussions programmes, documentaries, dramas and fictional or biographical accounts). Such a momentous event as World War I, though not a specifically religious one, is appropriately discussed on a site such as this, which cannot help referring to the things of politics and history, and the role and reaction of religion and religious people, and the way that important events have affected the Christian faith in Britain, Europe, and the West.

Some take the view that World War I is a most crucial factor – perhaps *the* most crucial factor – in the decline of faith, the Churches, and religious practice, in our culture and way of life. The experience of mass death – often sudden, seemingly-pointless, and brutal – destroyed beliefs (in this view) in a compassionate God who was directly present in history and peoples' lives. But more, it is held, the course and activities of the war revealed the inadequacies of the churches to account for such suffering, and fully to care for the bereaved and fearful, people both in the trenches, and at home. Certainly, the trauma of war strongly affected many clergy – trained in the warmth of Edwardian summers, schooled in the balmy Victorian notion of endless, unstoppable Progress towards heaven on earth – such that many were all-but destroyed by what they experienced (there were notable exceptions, of course, and some fine Christians came to the fore).

I tend to the view that while the war and its effects were very destructive to Christianity (particularly 'organised Christianity'), the seeds of the damage had been sown some decades before 1914 by the materialist philosophies (or so-called 'scientific' materialism) that followed from evolutionism (or rather, perhaps, the Churches' too-ready acceptance of evolution). The 'Death of God', and all its implications, would have gained acceptance among intellectuals, academics and politicians, had the war *not* occurred (indeed, speculating on the shape of 20th century Europe, in the absence of WWI, is interesting, and may not be an entirely useless activity).

But WWI did occur, and did involve the loss of so many of the generation born in the late-19th century. Many people today point to the loss of so much human resource and ability, by which much might have been given to the world; but often the same people are happy with the activity of the abortion industry (820 lives destroyed per working day, I read recently) which has had many more victims than WWI (and II). Of course, all those who perished in WWI would now be dead anyway, and, however killed, all generations pass away, as do all the human institutions and organisations ("Earth's proud empires ...") that make life what it is; even Lazarus died eventually. All history is that of endings and loss, and even if we today could, in the near future, produce a 'good world' – the aim of so many different people, possessed of such different motivations, convictions, and methods – we should remember that there is no reason whatever to suppose it would last indefinitely; those who posit 'change', to human nature, must believe that such change is possible, but accept that it might not be permanent.

And what, we may ask, did the people of WWI fight and die *for*, exactly? At first (the 1920s) it was thought to be "the Great War *for civilisation*" (the recent TV documentaries have reminded us that the anti-war account of WWI ('the poet's view', war as futility) is a later view, although the one held

without question by most people today). Ultimately, they (and their predecessors from 1945 right back to the repulse of the Spanish Armada,) fought to preserve British/English sovereignty (since thrown away haplessly by an uncaring generation of spineless politicians, in our own time). Britain, like everything else in the world, can surely not last for ever, but its ending (in the likely form of absorption into the EU) negates all that our forebears died for, and makes the presence of poppy-wearing political leaders at the Cenotaph ceremony an act of gross hypocrisy (they all believe in continued 'membership of Europe' whatever their words). The only value of human life – the only permanence – is the eternity of joy that has been secured for us. Thanks be to God!

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