



18 May 2014
The Fourth Sunday after Easter
Choral Evensong
Psalm 23
Ephesians 6 vv. 1–24

Banded in a Great Crusade: Anglican responses to the Great War

By Dr Edward Madigan

Lecturer in Public History and WW1, University of London

War, any war, first and foremost, is a military endeavour, and the essence of that endeavour is killing. When states or national communities go to war that, their ultimate objective is to kill enemy combatants, and by so doing to emerge victorious. Now, during the First World War, whole societies were drawn into a process of industrialised killing that was completely unprecedented. Soldiers on the fighting fronts of course experienced this in a very direct way – they were ‘at the sharp end’ to use that clichéd phrase, so they perpetrated intense violence and were also the victims of violence on a vast scale. But civilians on the home fronts were also very much involved in the violence that occurred between 1914 and ’18. Firstly, they were killed or wounded by the enemy, especially in continental Europe, but also in parts of Britain and on the high seas during the German air-ship raids and U-boat campaigns that began in 1915 and continued for much of the rest of the war. British families also suffered intense levels of bereavement as their loved ones were killed or mortally wounded on the fighting front. In their support for the national war effort, moreover, civilians played an important role in industrialised killing on the Western Front and elsewhere.

A question I began asking myself some years ago was ‘what role did the churches and clergy play in all of this?’

I think it’s important that we remember in this centenary year of the outbreak of the First World War, that all of the various religious bodies across the United Kingdom supported the British war effort to a greater or lesser extent.

Clerical support for the war manifested itself in a variety of different ways and it should be stressed that some voices were less strident than others, that not all clergymen were actively involved in recruitment, and that certain prominent clergy advocated a spirit of calm conciliation toward the German people. There was also at least some clerical questioning of British military tactics. But these nuances notwithstanding, it is striking just how unanimous and widespread church support for the war actually was. This is perhaps unsurprising in the cases of the established churches of England and Scotland, but British and Irish Roman Catholics, Irish and English Presbyterians, Methodists and the clergy of each of the various nonconformist churches across the UK, along with the leaders of the British Jewish community, all either acquiesced in or actively supported the war effort. Even the British Society of Friends, traditionally the most pacifist of the religious institutions, stopped short of condemning the British declaration of war and the subsequent national mobilisation. Dissenting clerical voices were not unheard of, but no more than a handful of clergy appear to have formally opposed the war, and certainly none of the leaders of the various religious churches came out against mobilisation. This widespread support for the war among the British clergy in part reflects the generally pro-war, anti-German mood of the wider population. But it also reveals an apparently sincere clerical understanding of the conflict as a *just war*, a view that clergymen were keen to share with their congregations.

There were also some very prominent clergy who were prepared take just war rhetoric a step further and cast the conflict as a *holy war*. The most senior and most well-known of these was the Bishop of London, Arthur Foley Winnington Ingram. By 1914, Winnington-Ingram had been Bishop of London for ten years and had become the public face of the Church of England for many British people.

The contents of this paper are the views and expressions of the author.

The contents may not be used without the permission of the author, more information can be obtained from chapel@joh.cam.ac.uk

© Edward Madigan



18 May 2014
The Fourth Sunday after Easter
Choral Evensong
Psalm 23
Ephesians 6 vv. 1–24

At Westminster Abbey on 25 November 1915, the first Sunday of Advent that year, he preached what was probably the most inflammatory sermon of the entire war:

To save the freedom of the world, to save Liberty's own self, to save the honour of men and women and the innocence of children, everything that is noblest in Europe, everyone that puts principle above ease, and life itself beyond mere living, are banded in a great crusade – we cannot deny it – to kill Germans: to kill them, not for the sake of killing, but to save the world; to kill the good as well as the bad, to kill the young men as well as the old, to kill those who have shown kindness to our wounded as well as those fiends who crucified the Canadian sergeant, who superintended the Armenian massacres, who sank the Lusitania, and who turned the machine-guns on the civilians of Aerschott and Louvain – and to kill them lest the civilization of the world itself be killed.

The Bishop then went on to say that he looked ‘on everyone who fights for this cause as a hero and everyone who dies in it as a martyr’. Now, even under the extraordinary circumstances of a world war, these are strong words. And they had been uttered by a more junior clergyman they might not take on the same significance. But, as Bishop of London, Winnington-Ingram was the third most senior clergyman in the Church of England and a figure who exerted considerable influence in British public life. The sermon was heard by as many as 2000 Anglicans on the day it was preached, and when it was published two years later it reached a much larger audience. In using such aggressive, uncompromising language the bishop was going beyond simply offering support for the war effort, he was apparently endorsing indiscriminate violence against the German people. And by referring to the Allied war dead as martyrs, he was suggesting that those who died in the conflict were fulfilling a Christian destiny.

Nor was Winnington-Ingram the only senior Anglican clergyman who was prepared to use such bellicose rhetoric in the pulpit. Basil Wilberforce, the Archdeacon of Westminster and Chaplain to the House of Commons, was arguably even more belligerent. Now, in their basic support for the British war effort and their belief in the righteousness of the Allied cause, Winnington-Ingram and Wilberforce were highly typical of the British clergy during the war. Their extreme language and their view of the conflict as a *holy war*, was much less typical and it attracted a certain amount of criticism, both in the press and in parliament.

The pulpit rhetoric of these civilian clergymen was particularly hard for Anglican Army Chaplains to bear. Between 1914 and '18, approximately 3,000 Anglican clergymen served as chaplains to the forces. Most of these men served on the Western Front and a great many of them served with distinction. Well over 200 of these men were decorated for gallantry under fire and three were awarded the Victoria Cross. Their ministry was exceptionally, I would say uniquely, challenging and dangerous. They had little or no training, but on the Western Front at least they were generally valued for sustaining troop morale, both as spiritual guides and what today we might call welfare officers. They often drew on biblical and other religious texts to console both themselves and the officers and men to whom they ministered. But very few padres resorted to the crusading pulpit rhetoric of the civilian clergy, and most of them were deeply uncomfortable with it.



18 May 2014
The Fourth Sunday after Easter
Choral Evensong
Psalm 23
Ephesians 6 vv. 1–24

One such chaplain was Oswin Creighton, who coincidentally was the son of a former Bishop of London, Mandell Creighton ...

Interesting character ...

Like many chaplains who served at the front, he was often in awe of the officers and men to whom he was trying to minister ... Consistently impressed by their qualities of brotherhood or fellowship, their courage, their good-humour and, perhaps above all, their extraordinary spirit of self-sacrifice. And as clergymen, chaplains naturally interpreted these qualities, these traits, as Christian virtues.

In a diary entry written during the Battle of Arras in the spring of 1917, he was quite unequivocal in his refusal to preach a gospel of hate:

We are always being taught to hate the Germans, and to refuse to think or speak of peace. We are told about our glorious cause, till it simply stinks in the nostrils of the average man. We all know we have got to fight as long as we wear the uniform, and have thereby committed ourselves to slaughtering as many Germans as possible. But I, for one, and I tell the men exactly the same, utterly refuse to hate the Kaiser or any of them, or to believe that I am fighting for a glorious cause, or anything that the papers tell me.

Creighton continued to serve with great dedication to his chaplaincy until he was killed at the front in 1918.

So, again, the essence of war is killing. Both the Bishop of London and the junior army chaplain understood this basic truth, but for the young clergyman who served and ultimately died at the front the idea of dressing up the process of killing as a crusade or a holy war was obscene.

In this first year of the centenaries of the Great War, I think we should try to remember that the British armed forces are still at war. British men remain on active service in Afghanistan; they kill, and *are* killed, and when they are killed, their families at home are deeply bereaved. Unlike during the First World War, however, we don't have the sense that we are all drawn into this process.

War may sometimes be just. War may be necessary. It may be the lesser of two evils. But if we regard ourselves as Christian, or simply as people who desire to be moral and virtuous, then we must seriously question whether war can ever be holy

Amen.