

A Slaughter of Innocence: World War I
Rev. Roger Jones
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento
Memorial Day Sunday, May 24, 2015



Australia & New Zealand Soldiers
in a Front Line Trench, Gallipoli Peninsula, Turkey, 1915

Hymns: #162, Gonna Lay Down My Sword and Shield; #120, Turn Back; #159, This Is My Song.

Music (piano): “Dawn,” by Frank Bridge, from “Three Improvisations for the Left Hand,” 1918.

Sermon Part 1: An Enumeration

The music we just heard was one of three pieces written by Frank Bridge after the First World War for the pianist Douglas Fox, a friend who had lost his right arm in the war. In fact there are dozens of pieces written for the left hand, many of them for this reason.

The war began one hundred years ago, in August of 1914, and ended four years later, on November 11, 1918. The war changed the political map of the world. Three empires ended: Russian, Ottoman, and Austro-Hungarian. The United States emerged from the war as a dominant military, economic and political power. (Tooze, 5) The Soviet Union was born. The current map of the Middle East was drawn, creating Iraq and Syria.

The war didn't make Belgium and France into Germany's colonies, as its rulers had hoped. Nor did the war “make the world safe for democracy,” as Allied leaders had promised and proclaimed it would. What it did was take the lives of millions of people, and to ruin the bodies and souls of many others, most of them young men. On this Memorial Day, it is important to remember.

The Allied powers mobilized 39 million men to fight and lost 4.6 million of them, including Russians, British subjects from Britain, India, Canada, New Zealand and Australia, and including French citizens and subjects from colonies in Africa and the Pacific Islands. (Jenkins, 271, on colonial subjects) The U.S. entered late but mobilized 4.3 million men, and lost 115,000 of them. Austria-Hungary, Germany, and the other Central Powers mobilized 23 million men and lost four million, including colonial subjects. (Howard, 146, on statistics)

These war statistics do not include the millions of Armenians purged by genocide in Turkey, or the Russian lives lost in revolution at home, or the millions who died from war-related epidemics of typhus and influenza. The war was a disaster, and it set the stage for an even greater one in less than two decades. (Tooze, 7)

During the First World War, the composer Gustav Holst asked his friend Robert Bax to write a hymn text for Holst's arrangement of a traditional hymn tune. A Buddhist, Bax died in 1962. Originally entitled, “Turn Back, O Man,” the hymn contains lament as well as hope for humanity. The text has been revised only a little in our hymnal, and you can find it at #120. Please join me in singing.

Hymn #120

Sermon Part 2: Longing for Understanding

On a warm summer day, to stroll through the green lawns and gardens of a battlefield cemetery can be an experience of tranquility. Standing at a gray granite memorial to a war can be a moment of learning, reflection, and the giving of thanks. Yet behind those tranquil sculptures and graveyards are oceans of suffering. They contain the confusion of the battlefield, the soul-shattering noise, the sickening stench of unwashed comrades and nearby corpses, your grief and fear at the death

around you, the frostbite, the hunger, and the agony of your mortal wounds. A stone monument stands for so much suffering.

In the summer of 1914, a teenage Serbian terrorist killed the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne. Serbians resisted living under the merged empire of Austria-Hungary. After the assassination, attacked Serbia, and Russia jumped in to defend the Serbs. Germany had its own aims for expansion, though it was also committed to backing up Austria-Hungary against Russia, and it did.

Thinking the war was winnable in a year, the Germans invaded Belgium and northeastern France. Had they ever taken Paris, they would have added the whole country to the German empire, and been always within striking distance of Great Britain. Hence, one million British men volunteered to drive Germany out of Belgium and France. (Howard, 44)

In the first year of the war, Austria-Hungary lost two million men, including its professional class, which had held together soldiers comprising 12 different languages. (Howard, 74) Entire units of ethnic soldiers deserted. (Howard, 58) In Russia, the governing bureaucracy failed, leading to food shortages, strikes and protests in the cities, and evasions of the draft by peasants in the countryside. Russian soldiers often had to attack the enemy with no artillery protection, sometimes even without rifles! (Howard, 74)

Historian Michael Howard says that, given their hardships, Russia and Austria-Hungary would soon have stopped fighting over Serbia, but by now Great Britain and Germany were “in the driver’s seat” of the war. (Howard, 44)

Most of this war’s battles involved only small gains in territory, or defending gains won earlier. To this end (defending territory), soldiers from all sides dug trenches, defended them, and lived in them. In all, there were 475 miles of trenches, home to millions of men, rivaling the world’s big cities in population. (Jenkins, 43)

Soldiers would rise from their trenches, and head forward into a sea of machine gun fire, sometimes dying in formation, their bodies falling in perfect alignment. Philip Jenkins writes that military tacticians would calculate, “calmly and rationally,” the numbers of men they would plan to

lose in each onslaught. When fewer died than leaders had expected, they wondered if they were keeping up with plans. (Jenkins, 59)

To describe these massacres, the term *human sacrifice* bears too much dignity. Dying by the tens of thousands, draftees and volunteers alike were treated as cannon fodder.

The trench system ensured a long war of siege and stalemate, and by 1916, all sides relied on winning by attrition—not merely by killing and wearing down soldiers, but wearing down public morale in enemy lands, and starving them into giving up the conflict.

This war by attrition entailed nearly wiping a generation of young men. There were so many huge battles in this war, in Europe and elsewhere. In the Battle of the [river] Somme, for example, Britain suffered its worst military disaster ever. (Jenkins, 55) To do any one battle justice would be unfair to those lost in the other battles. Yet it must be noted that most of them brought little strategic advantage. The Battle of Verdun lasted 11 months, with 800,000 casualties, as France defended its historic fortress. The French won the battle, but it shattered their army.

In this war, traditional fighting met new technology. Fighting forces made use of carrier pigeons and human runners for battlefield communications. Two million horses died in service. Yet the war saw the deployment of airplanes for the first time, and German U-boat submarines to sink British fighter ships and freighter ships, and even passenger ships. Tanks were introduced in this war, and artillery guns came to the battlefield, and flame-throwers. So did chemical weapons--chlorine gas and mustard gas, used first by the Germans, and later used against them.

German military theorist Carl von Clausewitz wrote that war needs three ingredients: government policy, military action, and “the passions of the people.” (Howard, 5). The nationalistic passions for this war were expressed in religious language.

For example, filled with national glory, one German preacher asked, “When did peacetime ever offer us the heavenly exaltation that we are feeling in war?” (Jenkins, 13)

Philip Jenkins explains that religious understandings, images, frameworks, and stories were embedded in the national cultures of Europe. Such worldviews made it easy for leaders and ordinary people alike to cast this war as a holy war. For every side, it was a sacred campaign.

Using Biblical stories of Armageddon, preachers and politicians took up the cause. This earthly battle had cosmic implications; it mirrored the heavenly battle of God and Satan, good and evil. Vivid images of a great, final battle appear in apocalyptic literature like the New Testament's Book of Revelation. You can hear this idea of a final, concluding battle resonating even in secular promises. President Woodrow Wilson said this war was necessary "to make the world safe for democracy." The idea that a lasting and final peace is achievable by a final and holy war comes from Christian doctrines known as millennialist, but the President was quoting science fiction writer H.G. Wells when he promised the same goal. He said: "This is a war to end all wars." (Wilson 1917)

People spoke of the deaths of their soldiers as redemptive sacrifices--of men giving their lives for others, and for God, just as Christ had. Death could be justified, even appealing, in such a holy cause, for their immediate status as martyrs was guaranteed for those who fell. As Jenkins notes, such language differs little from the words of those today who promote violent interpretations of the religion of Islam. (Jenkins, 97)

During the war, Jenkins writes, "each nation had its myths" and its legends of battlefield visions, miracle rescues, and visitations by spiritual figures. In one French story, during a fierce battle, the ghosts of long-dead soldiers rose from their graves and fought side by side with living comrades. Great Britain invoked St. George slaying the dragon. Germans proclaimed the superhero glory of the Archangel Michael. The soldiers were knights in armor. When the United States entered the war in 1917, an Episcopal rector in Washington, DC, said this war is "indeed a crusade. The greatest in history—the holiest."

Vera Brittain was a British nurse in the war, and later the author of the book *Testament of Youth*. Skeptical of those battlefield legends, she asked

what would happen "if the angelic protectors of the British and German forces encountered each other over no-man's land. Who would win?" (Jenkins, 15)

On both sides of the conflict, even liberal Christians argued for holy war. For decades, Germany had boasted the leading theologians of the Protestant world. From the 19th century German scholars had been distinguished for their application of reason and evidence in the study of Christian history and the interpretation of the Bible. Yet they turned into irrational nationalists and hateful militants. One German pastor rewrote the Lord's Prayer, asking for strength to carry out God's judgment. It reads: "Lead us not into temptation/ Of letting our wrath be too gentle." (Jenkins, 10)

In the United States, Congregationalist minister Lyman Abbot—a theological liberal—entitled one sermon "To Love Is to Hate." Another Congregationalist called for the sterilization of all 10 million German soldiers after the war, and the segregation of German women, to wipe out the German race. Jenkins stresses that, here and abroad, militant faith was not limited to a few celebrity preachers. It was widespread. Our liberal religious movement was no exception. Unitarian preacher Paul Diffenbach said Jesus would have joined this war: "There is not an opportunity to deal death to the enemy that [Jesus] would shirk from.... He would take bayonet and grenade and bomb and rifle." (Jenkins, 11)

As the Reverend John Buehrens has written: Unitarian "pacifists felt ostracized [in their denomination].... Former U.S. President William Howard Taft, [was the] moderator of the American Unitarian Association from 1917 to 1918.

"[Taft] persuaded [our] General Assembly that all ministers and churches receiving aid from the AUA be required to support the 'crusade for democracy.'" (Buehrens)

In New York City, the Reverend John Haynes Holmes was the pastor of what the Church of the Messiah, now called the Community Church of New York. In response to Unitarian militarism, Holmes withdrew his ministerial fellowship in 1918, and his church left the denomination. During the war there were only 15 pacifist Unitarian ministers. By its end, nine of them had lost or left

their pulpits. In 1936, the delegates at our General Assembly voted to apologize for having treated opponents of the war this way. As the Reverend Paul Sprecher notes, the delegates recommitted to our principle of the freedom of thought and conscience. (Sprecher)

For those of you going with me to Portland in a month as delegates to this year's [General Assembly](#), remember the pivotal role that such a gathering can play, for good or ill!

Organized opposition to the war was the exception, and is worth honoring. Women in Britain, Europe and the United States were still organizing for voting rights. They used their collective strength to meet in the Netherlands to argue for peace. One thousand women gathered, though Great Britain denied permission to 120 of its women to leave their country. In the Hague, they established the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and insisted on their full participation in democracy and an end to the war. One of our members has recently returned from attending their 100th anniversary conference.

Other justice organizations founded at the time of the First World War include the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the American Civil Liberties Union.

This war's most notable religious opponent was Pope Benedict XV. He took office only a month after the war had begun. He condemned the war, calling it "the suicide of civilized Europe." Unlike Catholic bishops aligned with monarchs and national churches, the Vatican was newly independent of state control. According to Philip Jenkins, Vatican City was like a marooned island. (Jenkins, 66) The Pope's words fell on deaf ears with fellow Christians, even many Catholics.

Normally in a war, you must rob the enemy of their humanity to want to kill them. In this war, Jenkins notes, the enemy had to be de-Christianized to be dehumanized. Propaganda from church, state, and ordinary people portrayed enemies as false Christians, even as the Anti-Christ. Such accusations of faithlessness among fellow believers, again, sound like the propaganda of militant Islamist fighters. Whoever he is, our enemy is an

infidel, a traitor to the true faith; so the ideology goes.

Of course the traitor to the true faith is the man or the movement that twists a rich spiritual heritage into a weapon. Things like rewriting the Lord's Prayer for cruel purposes were both irrational and blasphemous.

Northern California writer Anne LaMott has said it this way: "You can safely assume you have created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do." She was quoting a priest friend speaking about personal animosities, but it applies even better to national hatreds. (LaMott)

It was desperation and misery that wore down the passions of nationalism and militant faith. Fear, grief, despair and starvation caused riots on the home front in most countries.

In the last half of the war, hundreds of thousands of soldiers deserted the armies of Germany and Austria-Hungary and their Russian opponents. The risk of death by firing squad for desertion was perhaps a wise risk to take. For those who would stay and surrender in battle, there was little mercy. Battle victors would just as soon slaughter them as take them prisoner. Germany failed at its final blow against the French in part because German deserters had warned France of the attack. (Jenkins, 125) After the war, Germans were shocked to learn of the collapse of their armies, realizing the extent of the lies they had been told. (Jenkins, 132)

According to Michael Howard, in spite of the territories that Germany lost in the peace treaty, and the men it lost in the war, "Germany remained the most powerful nation in Europe." (Howard, 143) Fifteen years later, Germany began rearming, and planning to re-invade. (Howard, 138)

I have approached this war, not with a hope of understanding all of its complex causes and outcomes. I long only to understand how to live with this legacy of cruelty, and not to give up on humanity. To understand how to live with hope after learning what we have done to one another.

Such a history as this makes it tempting give up on human goodness and human possibility. Yet there are other ways to respond, instead of giving up or giving in. History also contains many examples

of non-violent courage, and of people seeking forgiveness and showing mercy. Our human legacy includes the striving to bring beauty into a broken world. The piano music for left hand, which we heard earlier, is an example of that, a restoration of hope by the giving and receiving of a generous creativity.

If a *holy war* calls for so much passion, imagination, and purpose as was devoted to the folly of the First World War, then keeping a *holy peace* must also require our passions, our imaginations, and our strong purpose. Peace can't merely happen. We human beings must give to life as much glory as we have given to violence and war--no, give to life *more* glory than we have ever given to violence.

You know, given the human history of destruction, it is amazing that any one of us is here, that any given person was ever born. It's amazing that you are here at all, or that I am here. It's a miracle, and a precious opportunity. Because we are alive, we have the chance to praise life and help it flourish. We can use our time well, and not waste any day.

We can show mercy, kindness, courage, and hope to one another. We can be creative and generous. So long as we live, we can strive to practice understanding, compassion, and forgiveness.

When despair is tempting me, I remember what a miracle it is to be alive. What a gift it is to be able to give thanks for any quiet moments of peace. What a blessing: to give thanks for the gift of every new day. So may it be.

Amen.

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