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Jason Crouthamel. *Trauma, Religion and Spirituality in Germany during the First World War.* London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. Illustrations. 272 pp. $115.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-350-08370-7.

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Jason Crouthamel's new book, *Trauma, Religion and Spirituality in Germany during the First World War*, aims to illuminate some of the religious practices of German frontline soldiers and, in so doing, to explore the relationship between religion and trauma during the war. Crouthamel's central argument is that "religion was the primary prism through which German soldiers in the Great War articulated and processed trauma" (p. 2). This is an area ripe for exploration, as there is relatively little scholarship on religious practices of soldiers during the war and because so much of the commentary that exists on it is somewhat simplistic. This is also a significant topic for historians of the Great War because it relates to so many others, including trench culture, war trauma, and relationships between soldiers and civilians.

Relying on letters, diaries, and trench publications, Crouthamel's book incorporates many varying and vivid descriptions of religious experience and identity during the war. Part of the testing that men experienced at the front was a testing of their religious faith. As Crouthamel points out, much of the existing scholarship on religion during the war has a bifurcated interpretation: religion either sustained men well or broke down altogether in the trenches. In reality, the results of war experiences on religion were far from homogenous. Some men found themselves convinced of religion's importance: as one stated, "all actions even the heaviest become easy.... And all my life is a gift from God" (p. 40). Others expressed somewhat opposite sentiments. One soldier noted that he was certain that "I have not experienced any external religious sensations, but I have experienced the strongest moral shock and strengthening" (p. 126). Many soldiers had shifting religious perspectives during the course of the war. *Trauma, Religion and Spirituality* excels in letting the voices of the soldiers speak on their experiences of religion and not forcing a singular interpretation of the effects of the war on religion.

Like much of the military experience, religion during the war alternated between encouraging agency and passivity. *Trauma, Religion and Spirituality* explores how that religion could seem-

ingly empower troops in combat and also sometimes encourage them to feel a sense of fatalism. The book's chapters describe how spiritual direction was not only received but also generated. Soldiers and civilians often embraced both prayer books and superstitions and invented their own new superstitions and interpretations of spiritual reality. Where some found comfort in the traditions of the church, others created their own metaphysical understanding of the war, by integrating elements of paganism and Germanic tales.

Trauma, Religion and Spirituality does quite well showing how religion helped soldiers communicate with civilians. Through the use of letters, Crouthamel illustrates how soldiers often preferred to describe their psychological trauma in religious language. Religion could also serve as a common bond between soldiers and civilians. Prayer could be a shared endeavor across distance. Crouthamel writes of "God as a bridge between combat and home fronts" (p. 49). But while religion could help maintain tight bonds with family at home, it could also test national identity—as when German soldiers attended church in occupied France. The significance of religion in bridging the distance between the combat and home fronts meant that changes in religious belief could equate to a sense of estrangement from family at home. And for civilians, loss of their soldiers could lead to a crisis of faith.

Crouthamel's expanded definition of "trauma," to include "wounded belief systems," is one of the best features of the book (p. 12). It advances analysis of the war's effects on soldiers. It also, very intentionally, brings the concept of "moral injury" into the conversation about the war. This is a worthwhile intervention for relating scholarship on the Great War to the study of other wars. It is also a necessary intervention for adjusting our understanding of the war's soldiers, often portrayed as little more than passive victims of extreme violence. Exploration of religious trauma and consideration of moral injury is a reminder that many of the war's soldiers were also killers—a few of them enthusiastically, many of them ambivalently. In chapter 7, Crouthamel describes the case of a pilot who found calm after killing only by climbing back into the cockpit to take down more planes, "the act of killing became the antidote for the nervous stress brought on by the act of killing" (p. 180). Experiences like these shaped men's perceptions of themselves and of their spiritual identity. Killing was also often urged on with religious language.

This book describes experiences that were likely shared across national boundaries but also helps us better understand the German army. For example, pagan imagery was particularly popular among German pilots. During the war, the government also endorsed, and was endorsed by, religious authority in its endeavors. German soldiers had *Gott mit Uns* (God with Us, commonly used in Prussian and German heraldry) inscribed on their belt buckles. Chaplains provided military services for combatants and civilians provided theological encouragement for combat. While many soldiers found some comfort in services—sometimes even Christian and Jewish in the same day—the longer the war continued, the more skeptical soldiers found themselves regarding religious and governmental authorities. In their diaries and letters, the cross became more personal and less patriotic over time. This aspect of Crouthamel's work could have been explored further in answering questions about German soldiers' identification with the nation over the course of the war.

If an important aspect of history is attempting to meet the past on its own terms, chapter 5 excels in this. Sometimes historians are extremely interested in matters that the people of the past found of middling significance. As Crouthamel demonstrates in this chapter, many people of the time, including psychologists, were greatly interested in the relationship between war and religion. This chapter uses specific examples and excerpts to show how scholars of the time interpreted the

war's effects on spiritual belief and vice versa. It effectively helps us rediscover the debates on the role of religion that existed during the war.

If there is one area in which the book could have been improved, it is with regard to the "official" and orthodox religious teachings and practices of the time. Crouthamel emphasizes that "military and clerical authorities collaborated to weaponize religion as an indispensable tool for reinforcing ideals of masculine discipline and sacrifice for soldiers" but often only briefly describes the more official or traditional beliefs (p. 16). This book, intentionally and appropriately, emphasizes the "other side": religion apart from the government's intentions and sometimes the church's official teachings. It would be too much to fully outline or explore the "official" church teachings and practices that operated in cooperation with political and military authorities and traditional religious orthodoxy, but just a bit more description might have been helpful for readers who are less familiar with twentieth-century European Judeo-Christian practices or German particularities.

All works of history suffer from source limitations. Crouthamel has found and employed a rich selection of soldiers' diaries and letters and even wartime psychological analysis of religion by combat veterans. However, many of these sources provide little detailed information about soldiers' prewar beliefs and backgrounds. In some cases, return letters are unavailable. The sources are not demographically reflective of the entire German army. The book's conclusions are not therefore inconclusive—Crouthamel convincingly argues his points, showing that the war's impact on religion is not easily simplified and categorized—but the conclusions are not comprehensive. This is not a weakness of the book, but the silences point toward areas for future scholarly inquiry.

For the ways Crouthamel's book opens up the experience of World War I to better comparison with other wars, it should be widely read. We can relate Crouthamel's book to some of the passages in *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien's classic about Vietnam. As O'Brien states: "The things they carried were determined to some extent by superstition. Lieutenant Cross carried his good-luck pebble. Dave Jensen carried a rabbit's foot. Norman Bowker, otherwise a very gentle person, carried a thumb that had been presented to him as a gift by Mitchell Sanders." These are not unlike the talismans Crouthamel describes among German soldiers. But, just as in the Great War, superstition and personal theologies existed alongside familiar religious forms in Vietnam. In a later passage, O'Brien describes the character Kiowa: "He wanted to say more, just to lighten up his sleep, but instead he opened his New Testament and arranged it beneath his head as a pillow. The fog made things seem hollow and unattached. He tried not to think about Ted Lavender, but then he was thinking how fast it was, no drama, down and dead, and how it was hard to feel anything except surprise. It seemed unchristian. He wished he could find some great sadness, or even anger, but the emotion wasn't there and he couldn't make it happen. Mostly he felt pleased to be alive. He liked the smell of the New Testament under his cheek, the leather and ink and paper and glue, whatever the chemicals were."[1] The relationship between religion and the war experience is relevant to every war.

Many academic reader audiences might enjoy this book. With its rich exploration of soldiers' psychological trauma and its relationship to religion, it could be useful to the field of psychology. This book might prove of interest to those who study the relationship between church and state, especially in Germany. Though thoroughly centered on the First World War, as Crouthamel indicates with his epilogue, the spiritual experience of defeat and revolution is also relevant to the rise of the Nazi Party and the origins of the Second World War. No doubt those who study that conflict would find this book a worthwhile read, and Crouthamel's analysis in the epilogue is very interesting. This is also a book that would be wel-

come in many university classrooms. It is not only solidly researched but also written in a style that can be approached by both advanced academics and undergraduates.

So much of the history of the trauma of the Great War seems limited to the concept of "shell shock." In *Trauma, Religion and Spirituality*, Crouthamel encourages us instead to consider the war and its trauma through the eyes of religion, as many of those who experienced it did. He succeeds in this objective. *Trauma, Religion and Spirituality* is a good contribution to the cultural history of the war.

Note

[1]. Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 13, 17-18.