

THE BIBLE AND THE BRITISH AND AMERICAN ARMED FORCES IN TWO WORLD WARS

INTRODUCTION

The two World Wars of the twentieth century were immense —even supreme— tests for Great Britain and the United States. Inevitably, the impact and implications of these global struggles were profound and far-reaching in political, cultural, economic, and geo-strategic terms. They also had major consequences for religious life in both societies. However, and while the Second World War contributed to a revival of post-war religion (albeit differently expressed) on both sides of the Atlantic,¹ the First World War has been portrayed as having a calamitous effect on British religion in particular, compounding and even driving the secularisation of British society—a process neatly defined by Bryan Wilson in 1966 as ‘the declining social significance of religion’.² It has, indeed, been claimed that the First World War administered ‘a shattering blow to organised religion’ in Britain, the sufferings and travails of the British people leading them to reject old-fashioned doctrines espoused by discredited churches complicit in wholesale slaughter.³ Although these claims are open to question, the shock of the First World War was soon followed in the United States by what Robert T. Handy famously presented as ‘The American Religious Depression’ of the 1920s and ‘30s. In the United States, and as in Great Britain, the once dominant churches of the Protestant mainstream appeared distinctly beleaguered, and evinced similar symptoms of decline. Church membership and attendance fell away; Sunday school enrolments slumped; old orthodoxies were less certain and more contentious; missionary enthusiasm slackened; public morality crumbled; fringe religious groups and movements gathered strength; and, after the Wall Street Crash of 1929, global economic turmoil sapped their finances and reduced their role and significance in wider society.⁴ So obvious were these symptoms of secularisation in both societies that, in his classic cultural

history of Great Britain and the United States in the Second World War, Paul Fussell could simply invoke ‘the obvious attenuation of Christian belief and context between the wars’, and the ‘secularized atmosphere’ of the inter-war era, in explaining why ‘religious respectabilities’ were, like patriotic sentiment, ‘already thoroughly in tatters by 1939’.⁵

However, this article will argue that Fussell was wrong—and typically overstated—in claiming a much higher degree of religious illiteracy among the Britons and Americans who fought the Second World War in comparison with those who fought the First,⁶ and very much mistaken in assuming that the secularisation of inter-war British and American society was an even and pervasive process. And it will do so by examining the considerable purchase and significance of the Bible in the British and American armed forces of the two World Wars, a factor which reflected the Bible’s abiding importance in British and American society, and which points to the limited and uneven impact of secularisation at that time. Indeed, it will even posit that the diffused cultural appeal of the Bible not only survived the shock of the First World War but probably increased in Great Britain and the United States in the years of the Second, and this despite a religious downturn in the interwar years which saw more public indicators of religious practice—such as church attendance and church membership—witness marked decline.

THE BIBLE IN BRITISH AND AMERICAN SOCIETY

In cultural and religious terms, early and mid-twentieth century British and American society had a great deal in common, despite the impact of mass migration to the US from Southern, Eastern and Central Europe and the large number and sheer variety of so-called ‘hyphenate’ Americans. In English, they shared the same language—or at least *lingua franca*—and ‘WASP’ patrician

elites comprised the ruling classes in both countries, their mutual connectedness reflected in the Anglo-American parentage of Winston Churchill, who was responsible for popularising the very term ‘special relationship’.⁷ Besides sharing the same dominant language and a similar ruling class, by the first decades of the twentieth century the liberal and democratic values of Great Britain and the United States were increasingly congruent, despite their obvious and abiding constitutional differences. In religious terms, both societies were overwhelmingly Christian and, despite America’s much larger Catholic and Jewish minorities, very largely Protestant. And, critically for our purposes, *Anglophone* Protestant. The largest Protestant tradition in America was Methodism, in its various iterations,⁸ and the Protestant Episcopal Church, an integral part of the Anglican Communion, was the country’s most influential denomination— and this to such a degree that the first years of the twentieth century have been dubbed America’s ‘great age of Episcopocratic supremacy’, a dominance symbolised by the inception and construction of the National Cathedral, ‘America’s Westminster Abbey’, in Washington D.C.⁹ Similarly, in the King James Bible (or Authorised Version) of 1611, the two countries shared a translation of the Bible which, in the Anglophone world at least, eclipsed all others. By the early twentieth century, in Great Britain, the United States, and much of the English-speaking world, the passage of the centuries had ensured that the Bible (and especially the King James version), had achieved a cultural ‘inescapability’.¹⁰ Not only did its values inform and underpin the legal systems and moral norms of British and American society, but the Bible had recently shaped the topography of both countries. In the United States, Protestant revivalism and Westward migration in the nineteenth century meant that biblical place names had come to litter the map of the country, one that incorporated no fewer than ninety-five variations of Salem, and sixty-one variations of Eden.¹¹ A comparable taste for biblical place names was even evinced in nineteenth-century, Nonconformist Wales, where even long-established settlements stood to be rechristened ‘Bethel’ or ‘Bethesda’.¹²

In this dense atmosphere of cultural Biblicism, there was a multitude of ways in which the language and the contents of the Bible could be absorbed, whether actively or passively. The contents of the Bible were most directly learned through reading, preaching, schooling and public worship. However, biblical themes were also conveyed and assimilated through high or low brow art, literature and music, while biblical tropes and language infused political rhetoric and shaped everyday discourse. So numerous, entangled, ubiquitous and taken-for-granted were these skeins of biblical influence that a 1946 survey of American reading habits found that, among 'active readers', i.e. those who had read a book within the past month, the Bible was by far the most widely read book. However, the survey also cautioned that this was very far from being the whole story, warning that:

Because of the unique place of the Bible among books, the findings of this study are open to some question. For example, many people read parts of the Bible in responsive readings in their churches on Sundays. Since this has become a routine occurrence, it may or may not come to mind when people are asked what book they have read last. People who read a verse or a chapter of the Bible as a daily routine may also, when asked about the last book read, fail to include the Bible.¹³

Another key indication of the Bible's position in these societies was that it was printed and distributed on a colossal scale, and not least to support the work of evangelism at home and overseas. By 1914, and in less than a century of its existence, the American Bible Society (which was only one of a plethora of American providers, both great and small) had already distributed almost 110 million Bibles and Bible portions; by the end of the twentieth century this total had reached more than 4 *billion*.¹⁴ Furthermore, and during its first hundred years (1804-1903), its British counterpart and original inspiration, the Bible Society, circulated 181 million Bibles and

Bible portions.¹⁵ Nevertheless, this constant inundation of cheaply-printed scripture was not without its problems, for according to the Anglo-Catholic *Church Times* newspaper, its availability by the end of the First World War was in inverse proportion to its attractiveness:

If there is one thing on which English folk are supposed to pride themselves, it is their professed love of the Bible. It is, therefore, to say the least of it, curious that they should persist in presenting the sacred text in a form that is, at its best, unattractive, and, and its worst, positively forbidding. Printed in a poor-faced type, in double columns on indifferent paper, with side notes and references in the shorn margins... There is about it the appearance of a book of reference, not of a book for continuous reading... When one comes to think of it, the greatest book in the world ought to have expended on its production all possible care and artistic taste out of sheer reverence. And when we think how, in these days, Bible-reading has so greatly declined, nothing that would tend to make the book attractive, as a book, should be neglected.¹⁶

Despite its profoundly formative role in British and American life and culture, traditional attitudes to the Bible were also under growing strain amidst the religious malaise of the inter-war years. Darwinian science, for example, continued to seep into popular consciousness and deepen longstanding doubts as to the literal truth of the Book of Genesis. This archetypal and long-running challenge to the inerrancy of scripture lay at the heart of the notorious Scopes Trial of 1925, a *cause célèbre* in which the state of Tennessee and the agents of biblical literalism won a pyrrhic and ignominious victory in the conviction of John T. Scopes for teaching evolutionary biology in the classroom. At the same time, scepticism over the Old Testament more generally continued to percolate down the generations and social classes in Great Britain. During the First

World War, liberal Protestant commentators repeatedly remarked upon the widespread difficulties that British soldiers had with ‘Old views’ of the Bible, and on the ‘urgent need for wise instruction on modern lines’.¹⁷ While it was noted that ‘difficulties about “Jonah’s whale” and “Cain’s wife”’ recurred ‘with curious persistency’ in open debate,¹⁸ the problem was summarised thus by the influential *Army and Religion* report of 1919:

[The Church] ought at least to have been able, with all the resources of preaching, teaching, and education at its control, to make the men understand the way in which the Bible should be regarded and interpreted. This is especially true of the Old Testament. Judging from the difficulties that are raised in discussions, the men seem to believe that a Christian man is committed by his faith in Christ to the stiffest theory of the verbal inspiration of the Old Testament, which would imply that the truth of the whole history of redemption which it contains would be shaken if it could be proved that any narrative were mythical, or that the Pentateuch was not written by Moses.¹⁹

An Anglican report, based on evidence supplied by army and navy chaplains, likewise complained of ‘Childish and crude ideas about the Old Testament’, that ‘Old Testament difficulties often settle the question of religion altogether’, and that ‘Old Testament difficulties’ could be so persistent that some chaplains were even abandoning its use in Prayer Book services.²⁰ And such problems did not abate in the inter-war years. Speaking at Church Congress, a national Anglican gathering, in 1928, the distinguished biblical scholar B.H. Streeter averred that:

The masses had begun to ask questions. They knew that what was once supposed to be unquestionable was questioned. They were aware that religious belief, in the form they had

come across it in Sunday school and in the average sermon, was rejected by large numbers of the educated classes... The conflict of religion and science was a question far more hotly debated in the slums of Manchester than in the Common-rooms of Oxford.²¹

This growing scepticism was compounded by the fact that knowledge of the Bible had become increasingly fragmented, a pattern that had also been apparent for decades. Significantly, the number of Bible portions distributed by the Bible Society in its first hundred years outnumbered complete Bibles by a factor of more than 5:1, and in the case of the American Bible Society by a factor of more than 3:1.²² According to an early twentieth-century historian of the Bible Society, to a very great extent this pattern of distribution reflected the religious and reading preferences of the public; whereas ‘Only one-sixth of the issues contain the chronicles, histories, laws and prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures... English penny Testaments have been especially popular,— nearly eight millions of them having been issued within the last two decades.’²³ This trajectory of increasing fragmentation—or, put more positively, diffusion—of biblical reading and biblical knowledge remained a feature of subsequent decades. In 1939, Gallup pollsters in the United States found that Americans preferred the New Testament to the Old by a factor of more than 2:1 (44 per cent to 20 per cent), and subsequently found that the New Testament was more widely read during the war years than the Old, though interest in the latter did show signs of resurgence.²⁴ This may have been partly due to the huge popularity of William Wyler’s Oscar-winning film *Mrs. Miniver* (1942), in which Psalm 91 served as a keynote text, and which (among GIs at least) was liable to trigger demands for editions of the New Testament which also incorporated the Psalms.²⁵ In 1933, and with reference to the gloomy state of world affairs in economic and diplomatic terms, a correspondent for the *London Times* noted that ‘In these days the habit of Bible reading shows a marked growth, and no wonder.’ Nevertheless, it was now much less scrutinised ‘to discover or establish doctrines’, and perused

much more for personal comfort and encouragement. It was also read less and less as a totality: 'The Bible is much read to-day in Anthologies, which indeed is better than not reading at all. It is doubtful whether the balanced significance of the whole can thus be understood; yet the study of the greatest passages cannot fail to refine and strengthen those who read.'²⁶ A decade later, in the depths of the Second World War, and for perhaps the same reasons, this piecemeal approach to the Bible still prevailed:

Though past generations have been perhaps too inclined to regard it as a single volume, uniform throughout in character and inspiration, to-day the opposite fault is more common. Those who read devotionally often limit themselves to a few books and to favourite passages, while scholars are apt to concentrate on their special fields of biblical study.²⁷

In overall terms, therefore, systematic knowledge of the Bible does seem to have been in retreat throughout our period. In a particularly telling illustration, and when surveying changes in 'religious outlook and observance' among British Methodists between 1914 and 1950, twenty-nine circuit ministers agreed that there was 'much less Bible reading and consequently much less Scriptural knowledge' in this tradition born of the Evangelical Revival of the eighteenth century.²⁸

Nevertheless, it is essential not to overstate the impact of these developments. Firstly, the deep cultural imprint of the Bible —and especially the Authorised Version— meant that its language still possessed considerable force and purchase even among those whose church attachments were exiguous to non-existent. As Alister McGrath has rightly stressed in his history of the King James Bible, 'The phrases and images that it deployed have often survived, whereas the specific religious beliefs they conveyed have not.'²⁹ Secondly, there is little indication that the

place of the Bible in the wider cultural fabric of the United States and Great Britain had diminished, even in the interwar years. In 1939, more than a quarter of all Americans still claimed to have ‘read the Bible all the way through’,³⁰ and even the impact of the Great Depression had failed to dent the circulation figures of the American Bible Society. On the contrary, for amidst the misery and uncertainty of the slump, 1931 proved to be the Society’s busiest ever year until the Second World War, seeing distributions of around 6.5 million items.³¹ Furthermore, and despite the constitutional inconvenience of the First Amendment, the Bible continued to be promoted as a matter of course in many of the nation’s public schools. By 1933, and through the collusion of state authorities and local school boards, a system of ‘released time’ for religious instruction was operative in forty-five states, twelve had explicitly sanctioned the reading of the Bible in public schools (eleven of these on a daily basis), and ‘more than half the states in the union’ gave ‘high school credit for Bible study taken in church schools’.³² The meteoric rise of radio broadcasting was also accompanied by the mushroom growth of evangelisation over the airwaves, and by 1939 (when Americans owned in the region of 44 million radios), a single Fundamentalist radio programme, Charles E. Fuller’s *Old Fashioned Revival Hour*, was being carried by 152 stations to an audience of 20 million.³³

In Great Britain, the pattern was much the same. In 1933, the Bible Society’s worldwide distributions (a subject still considered eminently newsworthy by the *London Times*) amounted to nearly 11 million items, with British sales of more than 850,000.³⁴ Even in the non-denominational, local authority schools of England and Wales, and once again through collusion at a local level, the Bible continued to form the staple of non-denominational religious instruction,³⁵ and its singular place in their curricula was reflected in resistance to Scripture being treated as just another exam subject. As the headmaster of Becontree Middle School in Ilford put it in 1934, ‘At present children delight in the Scripture lessons and are fascinated by Biblical

stories.’ However, ‘If a boy is compelled to study his Scripture as he does his English or arithmetic he will pass the examination, but fail to gain either a love for the Bible or a liking for religion.’³⁶ Also anxious to promote biblical learning outside the nation’s Church and Sunday schools was the Bible Knowledge Foundation, which in 1933 distributed nearly 10,000 prizes ‘among over 1,000,000 children who received regular Bible instruction in their day schools’.³⁷ However, perhaps the most powerful engine of biblical and religious instruction in the inter-war years was the BBC. With the number of licensed radio owners climbing from 200,000 in 1923, to 5.2 million in 1933, and 9.1 million by 1949,³⁸ radio was very much the medium of the age, allowing the Bible to be regularly aired in the homes of churchgoers and non-churchgoers alike. Profoundly shaped by the vision of its first general manager and Director-General, Sir John Reith, and free from any domestic competition, in its formative decades the BBC played a key role in the Christian education of the nation. Epitomised by the piety and austerity of the pre-war ‘Reithian Sunday’, in which the Corporation appeared to transmit the spirit of the Scottish manse in which Reith had been raised, the BBC developed a growing repertoire of religious broadcasting, to which the Bible was necessarily central.³⁹ From its first religious broadcast at Christmas 1922, in which the missionary figure of St. Paul was aptly invoked,⁴⁰ the BBC’s schedules expanded over the course of twenty years to include a rich and regular diet of religious broadcasting— with 35 separate broadcasts per week being the norm by 1941.⁴¹

The enduring significance of the Bible in British and American culture was also reflected by its totemic importance in national life. The centenary of the Bible Society in 1904 was, for example, ‘celebrated throughout the British Empire by assemblies, sermons, addresses and publications well fitted to show the hold which the Bible has on English-speaking people’. As a mark of the spiritual affinity between Britain and America, it was even celebrated in the United States, with gatherings across the country and Sunday 6 March observed as ‘Bible Sunday’,⁴² a

worldwide commemoration of ‘the mission of the Bible among men’.⁴³ Likewise, in 1938, and in order to mark the four hundredth anniversary of Henry VIII’s Great Bible, the first authorised Bible in English, King George VI commended Sunday 19 June ‘as a day of thanksgiving for what he rightly called a supreme gift to the English people’.⁴⁴ However, and despite its Henrician precursor, the Authorised Version retained its position as the most cherished translation of the Bible in the Anglophone Protestant world, and was duly hailed by King George V (who routinely read a chapter of the Bible every day) as ‘the first of treasures’ on its tercentenary in 1911.⁴⁵ Even in the 1990s, and amidst literally thousands of competing editions, the King James Bible was still the most popular translation in the United States.⁴⁶ Furthermore, amidst the quadricentennial celebrations of the King James Bible in 2011, and notwithstanding the wider cultural context of post-Christian Britain, David Cameron could still insist that ‘The King James Bible is as relevant today as at any point in its 400 year history... We live and breathe the language of the King James Bible, sometimes without even realising it... four hundred years on, this book is still absolutely pivotal to our language and culture.’⁴⁷

This abiding attachment to the language of the King James Bible in Great Britain, and its unconscious conflation with the divine, could express itself in striking ways. In September 1916, during the Battle of the Somme, Bishop Llewellyn Gwynne, the senior Anglican chaplain on the Western Front, noted in his diary that:

We were told by three of our soldiers that down in an old German dug-out there was an interesting spectacle of a dead German but as one of the men told us ‘he was coming asunder’ we did not descend. Darrell thought the expression was a compliment to me as a parson to whom he ought to speak in Biblical terms.⁴⁸

Less gruesome, but more public and revealing of this mindset, was the furore raised by conservative Protestants in 1941-42 over Dorothy L. Sayers's radio drama, *The Man Born to be King*. Billed as a BBC miracle play for modern times,⁴⁹ Sayers' St. Matthew was duly cast as a street-wise, East End Jew,⁵⁰ but much more controversial was a Christ who did not use the sacralised idiom of the Authorised Version. As one letter of protest written after the first broadcast in December 1941 put it, 'Two shocks broke on us this past week: Pearl Harbour [sic] and *The Man Born to be King*.'⁵¹ The Lord's Day Observance Society was still more aghast at this novel 'radio impersonation of Christ', furiously complaining at 'the use of many modern slang terms in the presentation of New Testament history— which means in effect a spoliation of the beautiful language of the Holy Scriptures which have been given by inspiration of The Holy Spirit'.⁵² If this reaction betrayed a historic cultural propensity to confuse the very word of God with the translation that was the King James Bible,⁵³ *The Man Born to be King* also revealed an abiding popular fascination with the Gospels. Intended for Sunday broadcasts of the BBC's Children's Hour, on average nearly 10 per cent of the adult population tuned in for the series,⁵⁴ and the whole cycle was repeated on an annual basis until 1946.⁵⁵

THE BIBLE, SOCIETY AND THE ARMED FORCES

In Great Britain and in the United States, therefore, the cultural significance and tenacity of the Bible, and especially the King James Bible, should not be underestimated— and especially so in time of war. A key indicator of the enormity of the strains imposed upon both societies by the two World Wars is, of course, the size of their armed forces. In the First World War, for example, well over six million Britons served in uniform, around one-seventh of a total population of 46

million.⁵⁶ In the Second, more than 16 million Americans served in the US Army, Navy and Marine Corps, representing one-eighth of the population, and comprising the largest armed forces ever raised by a predominantly Christian society.⁵⁷ By the twentieth century, the role of war in promoting the prominence and distribution of the Bible, particularly in the armed forces, was a hardy perennial. In 1643, for example, the crisis of the English Civil War produced Edmund Calamy's *Souldiers Pocket Bible*, a sixteen-page compilation of 125 biblical texts from the Geneva Bible (all but seven of them from the Old Testament, and none from the Apocrypha) which were intended to fortify the soldiers of Parliament in their struggle against the perceived despotism of King Charles I.⁵⁸ Similarly, the immediate progenitor of the great, nineteenth-century Bible societies (and, in fact, the original 'Bible Society') was founded in 1779, amidst the crucible of the American War of Independence, when Britain stood alone against France, Spain and its rebellious colonies, its patriotic and evangelistic mission being to promote the distribution of scripture among the hard-pressed soldiers and sailors of King George III.⁵⁹ It was, therefore, entirely in keeping with hallowed tradition that King George VI gave the following statement on the outbreak of the Second World War, a statement that was widely reprinted in contemporary copies of scripture aimed at service personnel:

To all serving in my Forces by sea, land or in the air and indeed to all my people engaged in the defence of the Realm, I commend the reading of this book. For centuries the Bible has been a wholesome and strengthening influence in our national life, and it behoves us in these momentous days to turn with renewed faith to the Divine source of comfort and inspiration.⁶⁰

The Bible and its values also remained central to the institutional cultures of the British and American armed forces. Rooted in the religious and martial norms of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,⁶¹ their disciplinary codes were underpinned by a system of oaths (including

oaths of enlistment and oaths of office) solemnly sworn on the Bible. Furthermore, biblical injunctions on Sabbath-day observance and strictures against stealing, sodomy and blasphemy were enshrined in military law and embedded in the unofficial codes of honour of the officer corps.⁶² The British armed forces also felt the legacy of privileged missionary activity that had commenced generations before. Besides the continued attention of the Naval and Military Bible Society (now operating under the banner of the Scripture Gift Mission), throughout both World Wars dedicated bodies of scripture readers, products of Victorian zeal for the evangelisation of Britain's armed forces, continued to serve the British Army and the Royal Navy.⁶³ Indeed, so high were standards of biblical literacy in the Royal Navy that signals were routinely conveyed as biblical references, and handbooks of biblical quotations were often vital tools for signals officers.⁶⁴ The scriptural element in the DNA of the Royal Navy—and the extent to which the Book of Joshua still sustained, however implicitly, the venerable conviction that divine favour was dependent on the observance of divine injunctions—remained very much in evidence. Writing in 1918, H.C. Foster, a Royal Navy chaplain, recalled a salutary case of profanity on a beach at Gallipoli:

There traditions of the past were worthily upheld by both officers and men... A few days after the landing, I was sitting with a well-known naval officer... We were smoking our pipes, and just in front of us on the beach were some blue-jackets... Suddenly one of the men came out with some exceedingly strong language, and in an instant the officer called out his name. Cap in hand, he came up and apologised.

'You must be more careful in future', said the lieutenant commander; 'you know I will not allow such language to be used in my presence; there is no need for it.'

'Aye, aye! Sir,' was the reply. 'I'm sorry; it's werry 'ot, and I was a-forgettin' meself.'

'That will do,' came the reply; 'remember, we don't allow it in the Service.'⁶⁵

However flouted or coarsened in practice, such institutional sensitivities towards profanity and other vices remained remarkably resilient across time and space. During the Second World War, the American Jesuit Daniel A. Lord, author of Hollywood's famous Hays Code of 1930, published his *Salute to the Men in Service*. Here, one of America's leading public moralists reiterated an abiding Old Testament theme for the benefit of his GI readership: 'Don't let's be unpleasant and untruthful,' he began, 'but the plain fact is that God is on the side of the land that loves and serves Him.'⁶⁶ And, as in the days of ancient Israel, central to that equation was the moral and religious state of the nation's armed forces. As Lord went on:

'Let's see,' we seem to hear Him say. 'Are these my soldiers? Are these my faithful sons?' Then He sees you... He sees that you're really doing a grand job for Him. You are in the state of sanctifying grace. You are refusing to commit mortal sin... He says, 'That's my fighting man right enough. I'll give victory to the side he is fighting for.'⁶⁷

Ultimately, so Lord maintained, 'The soldier who is leading a pure, fine, honorable, honest, clean life is the greatest asset we have for victory. God is going to be with him in battle.'⁶⁸ And these were not outlandish concerns. Early in 1944 —and, significantly, in the build-up to D-Day— the US Army's Corps of Chaplains launched its own offensive against profanity, reviving George Washington's 1776 injunctions against swearing in the Continental Army, and incorporating them into a patriotic poster that linked the virtues of the past with the cause of the present.

Usually born and brought up in the Victorian era, most senior British and American commanders had imbibed the Bible as a perfectly normal and unremarkable part of a superior education and upbringing. Indeed, one or two of them were amateur biblical scholars in their own right. Besides being the originator of the dreadnought, Sir John ('Jacky') Fisher, Britain's First Sea Lord for much of the First World War, had a keen interest in the evolution of the English Bible, and in his *Records* of 1919 even argued for the superiority of the Great Bible of 1539 over the Authorised Version.⁶⁹ Similarly, Archibald Wavell, who ended the Second World War as a viscount, field marshal, and viceroy of India, had a great interest in biblical history which he had cultivated while serving in Palestine during the First World War.⁷⁰ Wavell's subsequent history of the Palestine campaign began with an apt text from Revelation — 'And he gathered them together into a place called in the Hebrew tongue Armageddon' (Revelation 16:16)— and warmly applauded the tactics employed by Gideon in the rout of the Midianites in Judges 7, 'the first night attack of which we have a detailed description'.⁷¹ Given their backgrounds, such men were often adept at employing biblical language and conjuring biblical themes. Writing in support of the Church of England's National Mission of Repentance and Hope in October 1916, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Lieutenant-General Sir William Robertson —otherwise an anomaly in so far as he had been born the son of a tailor, had worked as a domestic servant, and had risen from the ranks—wrote to the Bishop of London, A. F. Winnington-Ingram:

This is to wish you complete success in your National Mission work. I fear that even yet too many of us are putting an undue amount of trust in 'chariots and horses' [a direct reference to Psalm 20:7, as well as to the Song of Miriam]. We may confidently rely upon our soldiers and sailors fighting bravely, and count upon having abundant ammunition, but we must not stop at that. I am old-fashioned enough to think that this great war, like those of which we read in the Old

Testament, is intended to teach us a necessary lesson, and if this be so it follows that we ought to examine ourselves and take the lesson to heart.⁷²

Like monarchs and presidents, senior officers could also serve as influential advocates of Bible-reading—for the good of the individual, of the service, and of the nation as a whole. On 25 August 1914, and amidst the crisis of the retreat from Mons, the last soldier-saint of the Victorian era, retired Field Marshal Sir Frederick Sleigh Roberts, recommended reading the New Testament to the soldiers of the British army: ‘I ask you to put your faith in God. He will watch over you and strengthen you. You will find in this little Book guidance when you are in health, comfort when you are in sickness, and strength when you are in adversity.’⁷³ When the Naval and Military Bible Society published a special pocket edition of the New Testament for the use of sailors, Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, commander of the British Grand Fleet, went one better in his message of support, simply citing two pertinent texts:

Be strong and of a good courage: be not afraid neither be thou dismayed: for the Lord thy God is with thee withersoever thou goest [Joshua 1:9]. Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the King [1 Peter 2:17].⁷⁴

Three years later, and at the request of the American Bible Society, the commander of the American Expeditionary Forces, General John J. Pershing, provided a similar preface for the American Bible Society’s new army edition of the New Testament:

To the American soldier:

Aroused against a nation waging war in violation of all Christian principles, our people are fighting in the cause of liberty. Hardship will be your lot, but trust in God will give you comfort;

temptation will befall you, but the teachings of our Savior will give you strength. Let your valor as a soldier and your conduct as a man be an inspiration to your comrades and an honor to your country.⁷⁵

However, a comparison between the use of the Bible by Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig and Field Marshal Sir Bernard Law Montgomery serves as a salutary indication of how the nature of command changed from the First to the Second World War, and how public appeals to the Bible acquired a much greater importance in the Second as the commanders of the British army adjusted to the sobering reality that their soldiers now had to be inspired and persuaded rather than commanded and driven. From the contents of Haig's diary, and the memoirs of those of his staff who were close to him, it is impossible to mistake the importance of the Bible in helping him to bear his personal burden of command. For example, at the height of the Third Battle of Ypres in the autumn of 1917, and after a sermon from his chaplain on Luke 22:41-43 ('And he was withdrawn from them about a stone's cast, and kneeled down, and prayed, Saying, Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done. And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him') Haig concluded that 'When things are difficult, there is no reason to be downhearted. We must do our best, and for a certainty a ministering angel will help'.⁷⁶ However, contemporary styles of command did not demand that Haig resort to the Bible to inspire his troops. In fact, perhaps his most famous communication, his Special Order of the Day of 11 April 1918 'To All Ranks of the British Army in France and Flanders', was singularly devoid of any religious reference— despite the magnitude of the German spring offensive that was then threatening to engulf them.

In stark contrast, and notwithstanding the declining state of institutional Christianity in inter-war Britain, from 1942 Montgomery made *habitual* use of the Bible in appealing to his soldiers in North Africa, Italy and Northwest Europe. Son of Henry Montgomery, the first Bishop of Tasmania and a prominent figure in Anglican missionary circles, Montgomery had grown up in a family dominated by his stern and puritanical mother (a daughter of the Victorian theologian and biblical scholar Frederic Farrar) and had originally been intended for the Church.⁷⁷ Perhaps inevitably, Montgomery acquired a precocious knowledge of the Bible and, by his own admission, scripture was the only subject at which he had excelled as a schoolboy.⁷⁸ Profoundly convinced of the religious foundations of high morale, and of the providential oversight of British military fortunes, as part of his legendary transformation of 8th Army's battered self-confidence in the summer of 1942, Montgomery deliberately employed scriptural texts in personal messages that were explicitly directed 'To be read out to all Troops.'⁷⁹ The first of these was issued on 23 October 1942, on the eve of the great British offensive at El Alamein—a turning point of the war—and concluded with a direct invocation of the God of Battles as portrayed in Psalm 24:8:

Therefore, let every officer and man enter the battle with a stout heart, and the determination to do his duty so long as he has breath in his body.

AND LET NO MAN SURRENDER SO LONG AS HE IS UNWOUNDED AND CAN FIGHT.

Let us all pray that 'the Lord mighty in battle' will give us the victory.⁸⁰

Later, Montgomery extended this tried and tested practice to the Anglo-Canadian 21st Army Group, which he commanded in Northwest Europe in 1944-45. On Sunday 17 September 1944, for

instance, and as British ground and airborne troops were committed to Operation Market Garden, Montgomery invoked successes since D-Day alongside the psalms:

Such a historic march of events can seldom have taken place in history in such a short space of time.

You have every reason to be proud of what you have done.

Let us say to each other:

‘This was the Lord’s doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes.’ [Psalm 118:23]⁸¹

Although this rhetorical device was one of a variety of means used by Montgomery to enhance his soldiers’ morale, it would be mistaken to underestimate its force, for, as intended, it made a strong impression on soldiers drawn from a society that still harboured a significant degree of biblical literacy. Perhaps consciously taking his cue from John the Baptist—an oddly attired and ascetic figure preaching inspiration and hope in the desert—Montgomery was, in turn, often beheld in a biblical light. As one officer recalled of Montgomery’s arrival in Egypt:

There was this extraordinary little man whom nobody knew anything about... And what he did was a sort of Wesleyan thing... It was a revival thing... The first thing he did was to preach a sermon, about victory and success. And with this trick of repetition- he had quite a small vocabulary really. But nevertheless he knew where he was going and what he wanted to do. And he preached at us, and people felt impelled to go out and carry this message...⁸²

After one of Montgomery's trademark pep talks prior to D-Day, an awed soldier simply remarked: 'It's like the coming of the Messiah'.⁸³ One officer who accompanied Montgomery to the headquarters of the US First and Ninth Armies after the German breakthrough in the Ardennes in December 1944 invoked a telling New Testament analogy, for it seemed as if Montgomery arrived on the scene 'like Christ come to cleanse the temple'.⁸⁴ Sergeant Norman Kirby, however, who was in charge of security at Montgomery's Tactical Headquarters, favoured an Old Testament comparison, the mood of Montgomery's HQ and its mobile church being 'reminiscent of the Ark of the Covenant which accompanied and comforted the Israelites on their long journey in the wilderness'.⁸⁵

Nor, it should be emphasised, was Montgomery alone among the most senior British or American commanders of the Second World War in harnessing the cultural purchase and potency of the Bible. For example, Sir Arthur ('Bomber') Harris famously defended the controversial area bombing of German cities by citing Hosea 8:7— Germany had sown the wind and would now 'reap the whirlwind'. Significantly, Bomber Command's sustained attack on Hamburg in the summer of 1943, which saw the use of incendiary bombs on an unprecedented scale, was dubbed Operation GOMORRAH, a moniker freighted with biblical allusions, including the famous 'brimstone and fire' of Genesis 19:24 as well as Jeremiah 49:18— 'no man shall abide there, neither shall a son of man dwell in it'. The RAF, it should be noted, also conducted more benign operations with biblical designations, including operations JERICHO, the bombing of Amiens prison in 1944; MANNA, the feeding of the Dutch population in 1945; and EXODUS, the flying home of Allied prisoners of war.

Less well-known British military commanders of the Second World War also stand out in terms of their extensive use of the Bible. In East Africa and Burma, Orde Wingate not only used

the Bible to encourage his troops but to christen and even inform his operations. The creator of the Chindits and the British army's leading proponent of irregular warfare, Wingate was brought up in a Plymouth Brethren household, an experience that left him with an indelible knowledge of the Bible and a fervent desire to emulate the exploits of his Old Testament heroes.⁸⁶ After leading 'Gideon Force' against the Italians in Ethiopia in 1941, in February 1943 Wingate led his Chindits into Japanese-controlled Burma, his order of the day ending with an invocation of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, 'Finally, knowing the vanity of man's efforts and the confusion of his purpose, let us pray God may accept our services and direct our endeavours so that when we shall have done all, we shall see the fruit of our labours and be satisfied.'⁸⁷ For the second Chindit expedition of 1944, Wingate conceived a strategy of fortified bases—or strongholds—which were to anchor operations deep behind Japanese lines. Typically, he outlined this strategy in a memorandum headed by a pertinent text from Zechariah 9:12, 'Turn you to the strong hold, ye prisoners of hope'.⁸⁸ A similar British general to earn distinction in the Second World War was Lieutenant-General Sir William Dobbie, who was related to Wingate by marriage. Well known in evangelical circles in the inter-war period,⁸⁹ and strongly inclined to view his life and career as a saga of God's providential care, Dobbie's experiences as governor of Malta (then the most bombed place on earth) from April 1940 to May 1942 carried him to new heights of biblical zeal and evangelistic fervour. Before the war was even over, Dobbie publicised his Maltese and other experiences in an autobiography entitled *A Very Present Help*, which drew its title from Psalm 46:1. Here, Dobbie strongly asserted the continuing relevance of the Bible and the power of prayer in personal and national life, putting a strongly providential gloss on what he called the 'tremendous and wonderful years' of the siege of Malta.⁹⁰

In keeping with three centuries of religious exchange between the British Isles and Anglophone North America, both Dobbie and Montgomery even won fame in the United States,

although the lustre of the latter's reputation faded swiftly in the post-war years. In 1943, the American religious journalist William L. Stidger acclaimed Montgomery as 'a preacher's kid who made good in a manner quite disconcerting to Herr Hitler', and noted that his reputation as a Bible-reading, praying, non-smoking, teetotaling general had captured the admiration of Americans at all levels of society.⁹¹ Similarly, by March 1945 Dobbie was heavily engaged in 'conducting evangelistic services in America', where his autobiography quickly attracted a publisher, and copies of his personal profession of faith were printed and distributed by the million.⁹²

Such transatlantic celebrity reflected the fact that many Americans fully expected their military commanders to be models of godly living, perceiving their zeal for the Bible as a badge both of Christian propriety and military virtue. In contrast to the situation in Great Britain, where the Bible was liable to be weaponized in the context of earlier military disasters, the public pronouncements of America's top commanders were more intended to reassure civilians about their Bible-reading habits than they were to steel their troops for battle. Conscious of the venerable precedents set by such legendary military heroes as George Washington, Robert E. Lee, 'Stonewall' Jackson, and even John J. Pershing, Douglas MacArthur and Dwight D. Eisenhower (America's two most popular generals, according to a Gallup Poll of March 1945)⁹³ were clearly anxious not to seem lacking in their zeal for the Good Book. Quoting the words of the exiled President Quezon of the Philippines, William Stidger told Americans that Douglas MacArthur (America's favourite general of the war, according to the same Gallup Poll) was very much a 'God's Book man'.⁹⁴ Crucially, Quezon's testimony magnified the image projected by MacArthur himself, who claimed that 'However tired I may be, I never go to bed without reading a portion of the Bible. The Bible stimulates that faith needed in times like these.'⁹⁵ In 1944, Dwight D. Eisenhower, who ran second to MacArthur in terms of popular esteem, boosted his

own public standing through a widely-publicised commendation of National Bible Week, a venture launched in 1941 under the auspices of the Laymen's National Committee.⁹⁶ Intimately acquainted with the Bible by virtue of his own childhood (his parents were River Brethren who had become Jehovah's Witnesses)⁹⁷ Eisenhower's timely and effusive endorsement ran:

It is truly gratifying to know that the peoples of the United States are setting aside a week to honor the Book which is our 'daily bread,' the 'Word of God'. While the utterances of God as recorded in the Bible are ever the need of mankind, it is in war- and particularly in the present war, with its issues of humanity and morality- that their essential presence is felt.⁹⁸

BIBLE DISTRIBUTION

Further evidence of the abiding, and even growing, importance of the Bible to the armed forces of Great Britain and the United States during the course of the two World Wars can be seen in the sheer number of Bibles and Bible portions distributed to them. In May 1915, when Harold Tennant, Britain's Under-Secretary of State for War, had been asked about the distribution of the Bible by the War Office, a practice which was then nearly a century old, Tennant had smoothly replied that 'Under the King's Regulations each man is entitled to be supplied with a Bible and a Prayer Book at the public expense, and I am not aware that there has been any deficiency in supply.'⁹⁹ Significantly, if Britain's expanded army had been reasonably supplied through official channels in the First World War, the much longer duration of the Second meant that, by 1944, the war economies of Great Britain and the United States were actually struggling to cope with the unrelenting demand for Bibles and Bible portions. That April, and when asked in the House of Commons whether he was 'satisfied that the supply of small compact Bibles for the troops has

been adequate', Sir James Grigg, the Secretary of State for War, warned that:

Bibles are not a free public issue to the troops in war-time. Like other kinds of books, Bibles are in short supply, and the Bible Societies which supply a large number of Bibles and Testaments free to members of the Forces are unable to obtain enough copies to meet the demands upon them. A considerable measure of assistance to these Societies in furthering their beneficent work has been afforded by the [Government] Departments in a position to help, but the production of Bibles and Testaments is restricted not only by shortage of materials, but also by shortage of certain kinds of skilled labour.¹⁰⁰

Even the fabled resources of the United States seemed hard-pressed to keep up with demand. In 1943, American publishers were required to cut their consumption of paper to 90 per cent of their 1942 levels. Consequently, and as *The Christian Herald* explained in November 1944:

The [American] Bible Society, face to face with a greatly increased demand, appealed for 400 additional tons of paper, basing the appeal on specific needs. The Appeals Board allowed just seventy-one and a half of the four hundred tons, these few tons to be used for Scriptures to be given to Axis prisoners of war and internees, and for Bibles and Testaments for the Norwegian Government.¹⁰¹

Although British army chaplains distributed an additional 30,000 New Testaments in

Normandy during the summer of 1944,¹⁰² the long wartime strain on distinctly finite human and material resources was certainly exacerbated by the multiplicity of suppliers in both countries, and by a shared tradition of civilian agencies distributing vast—even prodigal—quantities of scripture to service personnel free of charge. During the American Civil War, for instance, the Christian Commission alone distributed more than 3 million publications of the American Bible Society to Union soldiers, and hundreds of thousands of British-produced Bibles and Bible portions were run into Confederate ports through the Union blockade.¹⁰³ Edmund Calamy's *Souldier's Pocket Bible* was even rediscovered, updated, and distributed by the tens of thousands to Union troops by the American Tract Society of New York City.¹⁰⁴ In 1899, and during the first three months of the Anglo-Boer War, a lone evangelist in Southampton single-handedly distributed '8,000 Gospels and Psalms, 7,000 marked Testaments, and three tons of good and new gospel books and booklets' among British soldiers embarking for South Africa.¹⁰⁵ In the First World War, the British YMCA (one of many major providers that included the Bible Society, the SPCK and the Scripture Gift Mission, to which the Naval and Military Bible Society was then affiliated) distributed 'Millions of Testaments and gospel Portions' to British soldiers. For its part, and catering for a much more polyglot army, the American Bible Society published millions of Bibles and Bible portions in languages ranging from Armenian to Yiddish, its total distributions numbering around 7 million items—almost enough for two suitable texts for each American soldier, sailor and marine.¹⁰⁶ By this time, its preferred format was 'the vest-pocket size New Testament', bound in khaki or navy blue and often featuring a commendation written by President Wilson himself, in which it was averred that 'When you have read the Bible you will know that it is the Word of God, because you will have found it the key to your own heart, your own happiness, and your own duty.'¹⁰⁷

During the Second World War a major departure occurred in the United States when the

War Department began to take direct ownership of the publication and distribution of scripture for its Protestant, Catholic and Jewish GIs. Adopting a pragmatic policy that had been the norm in the British army since 1825, even to its supporters this decision seemed perilously close to a violation of the First Amendment, even though it might be defended on the grounds of its 'free exercise' clause. Distributions to the nation's expanding army of draftees commenced in 1941, their immediate and disarming pretext being a direct, touching and homespun appeal to President Roosevelt from an Iowa housewife, Mrs. Evelyn Kohlstedt, whose letter ran:

President Roosevelt:

I was recently reading how that King George of England gives a New Testament to every man who dons the uniform, with a testimony of his faith written in each one. Now I truly believe God will honor such faith and I believe that England as long as she honors God thus, will never be conquered.

I think it would be timely if our president would do likewise and place a Testament in the hands of conscripted men. Perhaps many would give their lives to Christ and the prayers of faith would save our country from war. It would be a God-honouring thing to do and all Christians would support you 100% and you would reap eternal reward. I'm a great believer in prayer and in God and hope you are too.¹⁰⁸

On Sunday 20 July 1941 the War Department duly announced its new policy of providing an 'Army Testament' to all soldiers who asked for one.¹⁰⁹ Bearing a recommendation from Roosevelt in his capacity as Commander-in-Chief, each khaki-bound testament was emblazoned with the words 'Presented by the Army of the United States'. By the end of 1943 more than 5 million copies had been distributed by army chaplains, a number that approached 8 million by VJ Day.¹¹⁰ This government initiative, it must be stressed, unfolded beside the continuing efforts of a slew of

civilian agencies, both large and small. For instance, and although the Navy Department did not follow the tricky precedent set by the War Department, by the end of 1945 the Gideons alone had supplied more than 3 million copies of their navy edition of the New Testament to America's marines and bluejackets. These gifts to the Navy were augmented by those of the American Bible Society, which gave a further 1.9 million Bibles and Bible portions between 1942 and 1945, in addition to its donations to the army.¹¹¹ Significantly, such wartime largesse was spurred and vindicated by the tercentenary in 1943 of the appearance of Edmund Calamy's *Souldiers Pocket Bible*. In the United States, this was duly marked by various publications and exhibitions, stirring for many Anglophone Protestants memories of the English Civil War, Cromwell's 'doughty Ironsides', and the Puritan militancy of their forebears.¹¹²

OWNERSHIP AND USE OF THE BIBLE

However worthy in themselves, possessing and prizing the Bible were, of course, very different things from actually reading it, and it seems safe to say that, as in civilian society, diligent Bible-reading for devotional purposes was the preserve of a very small minority of British and American servicemen and women in both World Wars. Despite the apparent success of publications such as *The Happy Warrior*, a pocket-sized anthology of daily Bible readings and devotions aimed to connect those in uniform with their loved ones at home,¹¹³ and hopeful claims in civilian society that the present war was prompting Britons to rediscover the Bible,¹¹⁴ in the sobering verdict of the First World War British army chaplain G.A. Studdert Kennedy, writing in 1917, 'There are thousands of Bibles carried that are not read. That is certain. If you give them out broadcast, that is bound to be so. The Bible, specially the New Testament, has an enormous circulation in the trenches, yet I very rarely come across a man who knows very much about it.'¹¹⁵ A comprehensive American report of 1920, *Religion Among American Men*, which was conducted under the aegis of a joint wartime committee of the 'mainline' Protestant churches, found that the same situation

obtained in the US Army. Despite the lavish quantities of scripture distributed to soldiers, ‘Many men figuratively transferred the Bible from the top shelf to the blouse pocket. It was comforting to have there as a symbol of religion and a suggestion of home piety. It was somehow a good thing to have along.’¹¹⁶ Furthermore, and even when it was read, it was too often done with ‘a vague notion that it was a meritorious thing to do’, or was merely another expression of ‘emergency religion- one of the accepted practices of religion to which men blindly turned for inward peace or outward security’. There was, indeed, remarkably little inkling among the army’s religious professionals as to what their soldiers personally derived from Bible-reading, it being stated that ‘Chaplains do not seem to know what men looked for in the Bible principally or what they found there.’¹¹⁷

Despite initiatives such as National Bible Week, and a raft of Gallup polls that seemed to indicate that Bible-reading was a growing trend in the United States in the early 1940s,¹¹⁸ there is little to suggest that this translated into an increased knowledge of the Bible as a whole. Although hard statistical data is scarce, Robert F. McComas, a Methodist navy chaplain assigned to Washington DC in 1944, was deeply unimpressed by the biblical knowledge evinced by the female personnel in his care. Although, and as in Great Britain, American women were deemed to be more religious than men, the results were deplorable—especially for this relatively well-educated sample of young, Protestant women. Of 169 WAVES who sat the test devised by McComas, 90 per cent of whom described themselves as churchgoers and for whom the average length of Sunday school attendance was ‘seven to eight years’, when asked to place ten books of the Bible in the Old or the New Testament their average score was 5.34- a result that could have been attained by sheer guesswork.¹¹⁹

Still, it would be a great mistake to underestimate the importance of the Bible for a significant core of devout—and usually Protestant—servicemen and women, or to discount the

purchase of some of its more memorable texts and injunctions on a much broader constituency. For whole ethnic and cultural groups, the Bible retained the same significance and inspirational force that it had for generations. Jonathan Ebel, for example, has illustrated how biblical tropes in African American religion influenced the perceptions and experiences of African American soldiers in the First World War, and has argued that the figure of Christ they entertained was different from that of their white comrades, being much more the suffering servant than the righteous warrior.¹²⁰ Likewise, and of his overwhelmingly Protestant comrades in the 36th (Ulster) Division in the First World War, the military historian Cyril Falls wrote:

[I]t was not uncommon to find a man sitting on the fire-step of a front-line trench, reading one of the small copies of the New Testament which were issued to the troops by the people at home. The explanation was that, on the one hand, religion was near and real to them; on the other, that they were simple men. They saw no reason to hide or disguise that which was a part of their daily lives.¹²¹

Beyond such discrete and recognisable elements, the Bible was also central to the activities of a countless host of classes and devotional groups formed among service personnel in the two World Wars. On the Western Front in 1917, for example, the Anglican chaplain Mervyn S. Evers presided over a thriving Christian Union in the 9th Loyal North Lancashire Regiment, a body that included a significant percentage of the battalion's Protestant rank and file.¹²² Likewise, the novelist E.W. Hornung, who served with the YMCA in France from 1917 to 1918, observed how a YMCA hut close to the front line provided a platform for soldier evangelists. Here, the star turn was a bespectacled NCO of the Royal Army Medical Corps who 'must have been a street preacher before the war' and who held evangelistic services every week. As Hornung remembered, on these occasions his 'uncompromising harangue' was audible throughout the hut as he gave vent to 'an astounding flow of spiritual invective'. However, 'It was impossible not to respect this red-

hot gospeller, who knew neither fear nor doubt, nor the base art of mincing words; and he had a strong following among the men, who seemed to enjoy his onslaughts, whether they took them to heart or not'.¹²³ During the Second World War, *The Link* magazine, sponsored by America's 'mainline' Protestant churches, published a weekly reading scheme for Bible study groups in each of its monthly issues (sometimes throwing in 'Our Bible Crossword Puzzle' for good measure).¹²⁴ However, by then such gatherings ran the risk of becoming new battlegrounds in the bitter struggle between America's Modernists and Fundamentalists. George Wickersham, for example, a Low Church Episcopalian Navy chaplain, was obliged to sub-divide his Bible class in the 8th Marines after one participant 'stamped out of the Quonset hut declaring that he would be better off reading his Bible in his tent than listening to us tear it apart'. As so often in civilian church life, separation offered the only solution, and Wickersham formed a separate 'Christian League' in the hope that 'my fundamentalist friends would attend the first, and my more analytical ones, the second'.¹²⁵

Despite deep rifts over liberal or literal approaches to the Bible, certain passages of scripture had enduring purchase among British and American service personnel throughout both World Wars. Sometimes, what had been retained could prove surprising. In 1916, a Royal Navy chaplain was dismayed to discover that 'The only thing my midshipmen really seemed to know, was the Tabernacle in the Wilderness [Exodus 25-31 and 35-40]. They said they could draw plans of it'.¹²⁶ Although observers of the contemporary British soldier agreed that most of what had he had learned about the Bible, usually in childhood, had been forgotten, it was nevertheless acknowledged that biblical ideals 'stick tight'.¹²⁷ In ethical terms, and as the defenders of societies in which a basic knowledge of the Decalogue could be reasonably presupposed, the Sixth Commandment therefore presented obvious problems. During the First World War, this was apparent even among British infantrymen who had already found their way to the front line.

While on the Somme, E.C. Crosse, the Anglican chaplain of the 8th and 9th Devons, was presented with a burning and fundamental question: ““Come on, Padre, what is your answer to this? *Thou shalt not kill*. What do you make of that commandment now?”” As Crosse remembered, “the only reply I could think of at the time was “Well, I hope that you are getting equally busy about the other nine.””¹²⁸ The question was also aired at gatherings of Padre Evers’ Christian Union, Evers noting in May 1917 that “[Albert] Mee maintained that Christ would not have entered into the war. Yet our duty to our comrades was clear [i.e.] to love him as ourself.”¹²⁹ The Sixth Commandment also lay at the heart of the story of the most celebrated American soldier of the First World War, namely Sergeant Alvin York, whose journey from would-be conscientious objector to the hero of the Argonne began with a lengthy and involved debate over scripture with his battalion and his company commander, who together persuaded him to fight by invoking Mark 12:17, Matthew 22:21, Romans 13:1-7 and Ezekiel 33: 1-7.¹³⁰ Highly symbolic of America’s experience as a nation, and of its reluctant but successful participation in the First World War, York’s original reservations were just as acute for many GIs even after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Intensified by the pacifist sensibilities that had gripped much of American Protestantism in the inter-war years, the problem of the Sixth Commandment proved to be among the most common dilemmas presented to American chaplains by those who sought their counsel. Based on his dealings with the officers and enlisted men of the 88th Infantry Division, Wallace Hale, a Southern Baptist, came to the conclusion that:

Roman Catholics, at this particular time, could bring themselves to accept a ‘just’ war, but I found that most Protestants were basically pacifistic. They hated war. They felt that war was sinful. They honestly considered that their participation in war was against their religious principles and yet most of them went on to war, and did a good job.¹³¹

Other parts of the Bible were, however, sources of comfort rather than perplexity. This was especially true of The Book of Psalms, and Psalms 23, 91 and 121 proved to be perennially popular (as they had been in Calamy's day, judging by the contents of the *Souldier's Pocket Bible*). Alluding to the supposed Davidic authorship of the psalms, Huntly Gordon, a son of the manse and a young artillery officer, wrote in a wry vein from the Ypres Salient in August 1917:

In this strange world, the Psalms can be a very present help in time of trouble [Psalm 46:1, again]; particularly as they were written by a fighter who knew what it was to be scared stiff. It's really amusing to find how literally some of them apply to life in the Ypres Salient in 1917. 'I stick fast in the deep mire where no ground is' (Psalm 69). 'The earth trembled and quaked: the very foundations also of the hills shook' (Psalm 18). 'The clouds poured out water, the air thundered: and thine arrows went abroad.' (Ps. 77) 'Thou shalt not be afraid for any terror by night: nor for the arrow that flieth by day. A thousand shall fall beside thee, and ten thousand at thy right hand, but it shall not come nigh thee' (Ps. 91). Very comforting that one, so long as you are sure you won't be among the unlucky 10,000! But David was obviously whistling to keep his courage up.¹³²

Such ambivalence, however, was alien to Charles L. McClure, a survivor of the April 1942 Doolittle raid on Tokyo, who testified that group Bible-reading every Sunday served as a major boost to morale while sheltering from the Japanese in a Chinese hospital:

On one occasion, I remember, I was feeling utterly miserable when the meeting started. After a few passages had been read from Psalms I actually felt that I would be able to get up from my bed and walk [an allusion to John 5:8]. It was, for a time, the best medicine I could have taken.¹³³

It is indicative of the widespread appeal of the psalms that one of the practical criticisms made by GIs of the Testaments issued by the War Department during the Second World War was that, unlike their Gideon equivalents, they did not include the psalter.¹³⁴ And the power of the psalms was felt no less by their equivalents in the British army. During the Battle of Arnhem in September 1944—a British defeat that was quickly cast as an epic of heroic endurance—Peter Clarke of the Glider Pilot Regiment, who had initially enlisted as a medic with other friends from his Bible class, found that the 91st Psalm was especially apt when under fire in a slit trench ('I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress; my God, in him will I trust... Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day... A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand...')¹³⁵ Furthermore, the Dutch civilian Kate ter Horst earned her place in the mythology of the same desperate battle by reading the psalms to wounded British paratroopers, a scene subsequently captured for the cinema in B.D. Hurst's *Theirs Is The Glory* (1946)—which featured ter Horst herself—and in Richard Attenborough's *A Bridge Too Far* (1977). For his part, Alec Bowlby, who served as an infantryman in Italy, testified to the power of the 121st Psalm after a failed attack in the Apennines:

In the late afternoon, when the air was soft and infinitely peaceful, the Battalion padre held a service for the dead. Several hundred men attended, and we stood in line facing the same hills... 'I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my strength,' read the padre... I looked at the hill, thinking of the men who had died there, and how close I had come to it myself. But as the padre read on it became more and more difficult to think of the dead as dead. The words of the psalm, the serenity of the hills, the touch of the sun on my face, confused them with the living to such an extent that for a moment I felt sure there was a God.¹³⁶

The comforting and even galvanising power of the Bible was also reflected in the texts chosen by chaplains as the basis for pre-battle sermons, and even as informal messages given to those in harm's way. A text much favoured by American chaplain Russell Cartwright Stroup of the 1st Infantry Regiment during the Second World War was derived from Joshua 1:9, 'Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the LORD thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest.' This text proved to be the basis of several of Stroup's pre-battle sermons in the Pacific theatre and, on the last occasion, when looking ahead to the landings on Luzon, Stroup explained its intrinsic value: 'It's a good text. It demands something of us and expects something of God. I like the picture of a man in the might of his own manhood, sustained as he must be by the unfailing power of God- an undefeatable combination.'¹³⁷ However, the biblical inspiration that chaplains had to offer could be even more immediate. Maurice Peel, an Anglican army chaplain and grandson of the nineteenth-century prime minister, relayed biblical messages to the men of his battalion by word of mouth before they went over the top on the Western Front, his final message before his death at Bullecourt in 1917 being 'Jesus said, "I am with you always"' (Matthew 28:20).¹³⁸ Similarly, one GI recalled of a well-attested incident at Faïd Pass in Tunisia in January 1943:

We were under artillery fire, and a church assembly was out of the question. But, being quite a determined man, our chaplain solved this by sending a message, together with several Testaments, to the various foxholes. The message requested us to read several verses in the Testament, then pass the note and the book on to the next foxhole. This we did, and the result was an immediate brightening of our outlook.¹³⁹

While imminent danger was a major and predictable spur to Bible reading, there were many other kinds of situational stimuli. Despite Studdert Kennedy's low estimation of Bible-reading among British soldiers in the trenches of the Western Front, a nurse who had 'served in Cambridge and France' testified for *The Army and Religion* report that many convalescents 'used to read the little Gospels which had been given to them'.¹⁴⁰ There was also a much greater interest in scripture among British soldiers of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force in Egypt, Palestine and Syria, whose milieu was quintessentially biblical. In addition to the prominent example of Archibald Wavell, G. Stephens Spinks, editor of *The Hibbert Journal*, remarked in 1952:

[L]etters from men serving in the Middle East testified to the effect which Palestine had upon men who had given up religion when they left Sunday School. The Bible, particularly the New Testament, came to life; here was Bethlehem, the Sea of Galilee, the Holy City, the Garden and the Tomb, and if much of what they saw was unhistorical, yet the total impression was profound. Their letters showed how much the life of the British people was rooted in the Authorized Version.¹⁴¹

This interest was registered by the Naval and Military Bible Society, which prepared a special edition of the Book of Joshua for soldiers serving in Palestine. Described as 'a sheaf from the cornfield of Scripture', it included a map of Palestine, the texts of Galatians and Hebrews (which 'take us straight to Christ, our secret for all that is good') and a message from the Bishop of Durham, who detected a salutary contrast between Joshua's honourable treatment of Rahab the harlot and Bethmann-Hollweg's contempt for the 1839 Treaty of London:

Joshua tells of a Palestine Campaign; it records deeds of destruction, for Palestine then was a moral cancer and had to be cut out. But it tells of glorious deeds of faith too, and see chapter six for a splendid story of faithful keeping of a compact, no ‘scrap of paper’ business.¹⁴²

The regnant uncertainty of war also spurred interest in Holy Writ, especially among those who had the leisure (for a time at least) to ruminate on an adverse predicament. Ernest Gordon of the 2nd Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders remembered that, following the fall of Singapore in February 1942, the Bible became the subject of intense scrutiny among British prisoners of war:

The Bible they viewed as having magical properties; to the man who could find the right key all would be revealed. One group assured me with absolute certainty that they knew that the end of the war was at hand. When I asked them for proof they told me that they had found it in the books of Daniel and Revelation. They went on to demonstrate mathematically how they had arrived at this conclusion. They had manipulated numbers and words from these two books in a way that seemed convincing enough to them...¹⁴³

American army chaplain Clyde E. Kimball noted a comparable interest among GIs stuck in the Icelandic winter of 1942-43. As Kimball complained, ‘I am surprised how often someone quotes some passage in the Bible to me and asks, ‘Doesn’t that prove that the war will end on such and such a date?’ They think, if I “believe” the Bible, that I’ll agree with them.’¹⁴⁴

However, the most spectacular story from either war of the value of the Bible to those *in extremis* was that of Eddie Rickenbacker and his comrades who —braving thirst, starvation,

sharks, the elements and the Japanese— survived in open life rafts for more than three weeks after their B-17 ditched in the Pacific in October 1942. In human terms, their survival was largely attributable to the leadership of Rickenbacker himself, a First World War fighter ace and recipient of the Medal of Honor. Nevertheless, twice-daily readings from an American Bible Society copy of the New Testament, owned by the plane's flight engineer, Johnny Bartek, formed a vital part of his regime, and their story became a wartime sensation. As Rickenbacker testified:

With the New Testament as an inspiration, we held morning and evening prayers. The rafts were pulled together, making a rough triangle. Then, each in turn, one of us would read a passage. None of us, I must confess, showed himself to be very familiar with them, but thumbing the book we found a number that one way or another bespoke our needs. The Twenty-third Psalm was, of course, a favorite. I have always been stirred by it, but out on the Pacific I found a beauty in it that I had never appreciated.¹⁴⁵

Besides renewing Rickenbacker's celebrity, and turning his lesser-known comrades into national heroes, their odyssey fuelled the wartime Bible boom in the United States. Bartek's battered and salt-stained Testament was solemnly returned to the American Bible Society, and in 1943 it achieved its highest ever distribution figures. Meanwhile, the War Department got to work stocking its lifeboats and life rafts with Bible portions, which were now viewed as essential items of survival equipment. In 1943, it was announced that every lifeboat on army transport ships would be furnished with copies of all three 'Army Testaments', suitably 'packaged in a waterproof container'. Moreover, and at the direct request of the commander of the Army Air Forces, the army's Chief of Chaplains prepared 'three special religious booklets (Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish) for emergency use' in its 'multiman life rafts'. These booklets comprised Protestant and Catholic versions of the Gospel of St. Matthew and a selection of psalms. Printed

on water-resistant paper and protected by a waterproof container, they were part of a survival kit that included other essentials such as a whistle, a compass, a mast and a sail.¹⁴⁶

In the religious and cultural context of Great Britain and the United States in the first half of the twentieth century, it was inevitable that, in the possession of a Bible or a Bible portion, there was often a very thin and even imperceptible line between Testament and talisman, faith and fetish. Furthermore, and given the sheer scale of the two conflicts, and the very prosaic details of army tailoring, there was no shortage of stories concerning bullet or shrapnel-stopping Bibles, which had become a soldierly commonplace long before 1914 (there were, significantly, far fewer stories from the navy: Bibles were clearly much less effective against torpedoes, bombs, and large-calibre naval shells). While there is little point in rehearsing a litany of stories to this effect, or ruminating over the theological problematics of survival (or otherwise), it is worth stressing that in the Second World War the full commercial potential of these stories was realised in the United States in the advent of the steel-plated Bible. Sometimes marketed as ‘Shields of Faith’, and inscribed with a suitable message such as ‘May the Lord be with you’ or ‘May this keep you from harm’, these were intended to be worn over the hearts of their owners, i.e. in the left breast pocket.¹⁴⁷ Deplored by John Steinbeck as ‘a gruesome little piece of expediency which has faith in neither the metal nor the Testament but hopes that a combination may work,’¹⁴⁸ orthodox Protestant opinion was predictably outraged. In April 1945, *The Link* carried a letter from Corporal Richard L. Hixson, an erstwhile divinity student, who fumed:

In my mind modern thieves have taken place of the ones Christ ran out of the temple... Last Christmas two sincere, sympathetic, but unreasoning people sent me New Testaments of the heart shield type; for my birthday I received another. A dollar ninety-five cents was marked as the price of this Testament which has a piece of tin on it. We who believe in the saving power of

Jesus Christ don't believe He needs the help of these commercializers to save us from our enemies. These deceivers would have us believe we have a weak God who needs material assistance, and these hypocrites who would use God's Word for their own selfish ends should again be exposed and 'driven out of the temple.'¹⁴⁹

In fact, by this time one manufacturer had already been 'indicted and found guilty of fraud in advertising bullet-proof New Testaments for men in the armed forces'.¹⁵⁰ However, and amidst some excited tales concerning their effectiveness (a Lutheran marine, for example, claimed that one had stopped a sniper's bullet on Tarawa)¹⁵¹ it fell to the Ordnance Department of the US Army to demonstrate the practical dangers of metal-covered Testaments by showing 'that the ragged pieces of these plates when shattered by a bullet would be apt to cause a worse injury than the bullet itself'.¹⁵²

CONCLUSION

Through focusing on the very largely Protestant religious cultures of Great Britain and the United States in the era of the two World Wars, and particularly on the experience of their armed forces, this article has illustrated the irregular, shallow and even paradoxical impact of secularisation on British and American society in the early decades of twentieth century. Amidst various indicators of increasing secularisation, a strong cultural attachment to the Bible (and especially the King James Bible) endured at both an individual and societal level. Despite the continuing retreat of biblical literalism, growing doubts over swathes of the Old Testament, and the impact of ever more fragmented patterns of Bible-reading, the Bible still suffused the predominantly Protestant cultures of Great Britain and the United States, remaining the foundation of their moral and legal

norms, a staple of popular education, a common repository of powerful themes and language, and a touchstone of everyday life and conversation. Though church and Sunday school attendance declined in the inter-war years, the Bible retained a strong degree of cultural resonance and purchase and, with the explosion of radio broadcasting (albeit under two very different regimes) quickly came to infiltrate the air waves in Great Britain and the United States. Furthermore, the travails and vagaries of war still served to stir biblical consciousness in the military and society at large, to identify ultimate victory with the stricter observance of biblical precepts, and to deluge the armed forces with Bibles and Bible portions. Indeed, the leverage and inspiration which the Bible continued to provide seems more clearly evidenced in the British and American armed forces in the Second World War than in the First, with the rhetoric of senior commanders and the state's growing ownership of Bible distribution reflecting and reinforcing the continued purchase of the Bible over many millions of civilians-in-arms. And, even if popular knowledge of the Bible in the round remained disappointing, its purchase continued to be felt and demonstrated in many ways at a more personal and partial level— ranging from the moral qualms that arose from the Sixth Commandment, to the sense of comfort derived from The Book of Psalms, to the commonplace appropriation of Testaments as talismans. Indeed, the underlying biblical culture of Great Britain and the United States, although less in evidence in the inter-war years, was reinvigorated in the crucible of the Second World War, a factor which may have helped to prepare the ground for the phenomenal, trans-Atlantic success of Billy Graham as the ordeal of that conflict gave way to a new and still more ominous era of nuclear confrontation.

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