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Philip Jenkins, *The Great and Holy War: How World War I Became a Religious Crusade*. New York: HarperCollins, 2014. Pp. vi, 438. ISBN 978-0-06-210509-7.

Review by Walter Moss, Eastern Michigan University (walmoss@gmail.com).

In his introduction to *The Great and Holy War*, historian Philip Jenkins writes that

The issue of definition is critical. To speak of a holy war, it is not enough to find national leaders deploying a few pious rhetorical flourishes or claiming that God will see the nation to a just victory. Instead, the states involved must have an intimate if not official alliance with a particular faith tradition, and moreover, the organs of state and church should expressly and repeatedly declare the religious character of the conflict. Not just incidentally but repeatedly and centrally, official statements and propaganda declare that the war is being fought for God's cause, or for his glory, and such claims pervade the media and organs of popular culture. Moreover, they identify the state and its armed forces as agents or implements of God. Advancing the nation's cause and interests is indistinguishable from promoting and defending God's cause or (in a Christian context) of bringing in his kingdom on earth. (6)

Besides stating his case for calling World War I a "holy war," Jenkins (Penn State Univ. and Baylor Univ.) outlines in his introduction just what his book's thirteen chapters will cover. About half concern the war itself and all its religious manifestations, broadly enough defined to include the occult and pagan. For example, we learn that German general Erich Ludendorff "dived into racial mysticism and neo-paganism" (158). The book is full of quotations of private individuals, including clergymen, but few government officials; its many illustrations exhibit religious influences. Also discussed are wartime films like D.W. Griffith's epic *Intolerance* (1916), which "brought the ... war into the apocalyptic framework familiar throughout Christian history" (135). The second half of *The Great and Holy War* persuasively explains how wartime changes in Western religious thought affected African Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

For example, chapter 13, "Without a Caliph: The Muslim Quest for a Godly Political Order," sums up nicely the century-long effects of the war on Muslim thinkers in Turkey, the Middle East, North Africa, India, and the Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia). A great strength of the book is its global perspective. This is not surprising, since Jenkins has previously written books on Christianity's development around the world.¹

The book's title promises a demonstration that the First World War was a "holy war," a "religious crusade," but its earlier, working title—*Four Horsemen: The Catastrophic Four Years That Remade the World's Religions*—suggests a more modest intention that more exactly reflects the reality of that war. It certainly had a religious dimension and left an "enduring impact" on various faiths, but there is no evidence that it was a holy war begun or waged chiefly for religious reasons.

Jenkins maintains that "with the obvious exception of the Turks, [World War I] was a Christian war" (7). Yet, in 1914, Roman Catholics were by far the largest branch of Christianity, and Jenkins admits Pope Benedict XV "did all that he practically could to promote peace" and regarded the war as "the suicide of civilized Europe" (65). Although many Catholics, in countries like France, did not share the pope's passion for peace and backed national war efforts, their religious leader opposed any idea that the war was a "holy" one.

Jenkins believes that Germany was the "chief perpetrator" of the war (34). Like its enemy, Russia, Germany "regarded itself as a messianic nation destined to fulfill God's will" (8). Most German Catholics supported the war, but the country's Lutherans were even more zealous: "Holy war language poured from the nation's Lutheran pulpits, from ordinary clergy as well as Church leaders" (77).

1. For a list of his six other books, see his Baylor webpage – www.miwsr.com/rd/1516.htm.

The author discovers much evidence of additional “holy war language” in other countries as well, but seldom from the lips of national leaders. For example, he cites no such talk from either of the two British wartime prime ministers, H.H. Asquith or David Lloyd George. In fact, Asquith called Anglican Bishop Arthur Winnington-Ingram, who believed his church had a duty to mobilize Britain for a “holy war,” “an intensely silly bishop” (71). Although the United States did not enter the war until 1917, Jenkins identifies crusading rhetoric there as well, again primarily from non-politicians like revivalist Billy Sunday.²

Although Jenkins’s text citations and endnotes (no bibliography) indicate a wide familiarity with secondary sources, he is much less conversant with materials pertaining to Russia than with Germany, Great Britain, France, and the United States. At least one such work could have strengthened his case for seeing the war as a religious crusade: Christopher A. Stroop’s 2012 Stanford dissertation, “Providential Empire: Russia’s Religious Intelligentsia and the First World War,” is a study of important Russian religious philosophers like Nikolai Berdiaev and Sergei Bulgakov, who regarded the war with Germany as “literally a clash between Christianity and godlessness. [To them,] World War I represented divine punishment on modern civilization for its godlessness, and they understood Russia’s calling in the war as a calling not only to defeat Germany, but in the process also to revive the Christian roots of European civilization.”³

Jenkins is chiefly concerned to show that various individuals, primarily churchmen and writers from different countries, perceived the war through religious categories and imagery. Some of his chapter titles and subtitles reflect this approach.⁴ As he observes, “Apocalyptic ideas exercised a special power” (16). He has little to say about ethical justifications for the war.

The author does not consider the possibility, raised by George Weigel,⁵ that one reason for the Great War was “the erosion of religious authority in Europe over the centuries,” especially the century of Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, and Friedrich Nietzsche. Certainly Darwin’s thinking contributed to that erosion in the minds of men like the German general Friedrich von Bernhardi and heightened the militarism that helped spawn the war. In 1912, the general wrote that “the natural law, to which all laws of Nature can be reduced, is the law of struggle.... War is a biological necessity of the first importance, a regulative element in the life of mankind which cannot be dispensed with, since without it an unhealthy development will follow, which excludes every advancement of the race.”⁶

Ignored here are the many religiously motivated opponents of the war, such as the British International Fellowship of Reconciliation, formed in Cambridge in December 1914. Their founding statement proclaimed that “as Christians, we are forbidden to wage war.”⁷ By this time, too, the religiously motivated pacifism of Russia’s Leo Tolstoy had influenced people like Mohandas Gandhi and Jane Addams.

In 1915, Addams and more than eleven thousand women from twelve countries attended an international women’s peace congress in the Hague; she later served as president of an organization that evolved out of the congress—the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom—and opposed the US entry into the war. In Great Britain also, a vocal minority of women opposed the war, including Helena M. Swanwick, who argued that women should have a special abhorrence of war.⁸ Although Jenkins does not treat gender differences regarding prowar Christians, the crusaders for war he mentions are almost invariably men.

2. He is indebted here to the Jonathan H. Ebel, *Faith in the Fight: Religion and the American Soldier in the Great War* (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 2010), which cites letters, diaries, and memoirs of American soldiers and nurses to demonstrate their militant Christianity.

3. Stroop, v – www.miwsr.com/rd/1517.htm.

4. E.g., “God’s War: Christian Nations, Holy Warfare, and the Kingdom of God”; “Witnesses for Christ: Cosmic War, Sacrifice, and Martyrdom”; “The Ways of God: Faith, Heresy, and Superstition”; “The War of the End of the World: Visions of the Last Days”; and “Armageddon: Dreams of Apocalypse in the War’s Savage Last Year.”

5. In “The Great War Revisited: Why It Began, Why It Continued, and What All That Means for Today,” *First Things* (May 2014) – www.miwsr.com/rd/1518.htm.

6. *Germany and the Next War*, trans. A.H. Powles (London: Arnold, 1912) 3 – www.miwsr.com/rd/1519.htm.

7. *History of FoR* – www.miwsr.com/rd/1520.htm.

8. *Women and War*, Pamphlet no. 11 (London: Union of Democratic Control, 1915) – www.miwsr.com/rd/1521.htm.

The Great and Holy War demonstrates in a very accessible manner that many Christians, especially clergymen and other people of influence on both sides, viewed the First World War in religious terms as a struggle between good and evil. Philip Jenkins argues persuasively that the war had many profound effects on subsequent religious developments, especially for Christians, Jews, and Muslims. He does not, however, examine religious disputes about the morality of the war, nor does he make a convincing case that the Great War was a “holy war.”