
World War I: Why Didn't It Put an End to Belief in God?

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For most of us—Christians and nonbelievers alike—it was hard to get into anything resembling the Christmas spirit in December of 2012. On the fourteenth of that month, a gunman killed twenty students and six teachers at the Sandy Hook School in Newtown, CT. The nation was in shock. Ten days later, at a Christmas Eve dinner with a Catholic friend of mine, the hostess referenced the massacre, saying, “God must have wanted more angels.” I had to resist the temptation to throw my drink in her face. If any Catholic theologians had been present, they would have swung into action, to perform an exorcism, to get rid of the demon that had invaded her brain. Theologians work overtime to explain why their supposedly caring, powerful god wasn't *willing or able to stop* the gunman. What's worse, here was a devout Catholic suggesting that her god had *engineered* the killing in order to obtain more angels for heaven. This is a symptom of catechism-induced brain damage.

Believers go to such great lengths to *excuse* horrendous suffering—to keep their god looking good. Most theologians these days are unwilling to embrace the biblical idea that god willingly massacred huge numbers of people to exact revenge, an idea that is firmly rooted in both the Old and New Testaments. Hence, the common resort of priests and preachers to banalities, such as “God moves in mysterious ways” and “We can't know God's overall plan.” Both of which are guesses, speculation, theological wishful thinking, based on no data whatever. These excuses have made it easier for the laity to shrug off the most horrible events in human history, claiming, “Only god knows why these things have happened, but we can't let our faith be damaged.” God is great, god is good, yada, yada, yada.

But no, the New Testament itself disqualifies these shallow excuses. It claims that there is nothing mysterious at all about god's *intense focus on every person*. Here is Jesus-script in Luke 12:6–7 (NRSVUE):

“Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God's sight. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.”

Jesus-script in Matthew 12:36:

“I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”

Mark 3:28–29:

“Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness but is guilty of an eternal sin.”

Then there is Paul’s warning in Romans 2:16:

“...on the day when, according to my gospel, God through Christ Jesus judges the secret thoughts of all.”

The author of II Timothy (widely considered a forgery in Paul’s name) believed that god was keeping a close watch on everything: “Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will pay him back for his deeds” (4:14).

This concept of god—who is the ultimate spy—was more credible to the ancient mindset when god’s abode was above the earth and below the moon. He/she/it could keep a close watch on everything and everyone. But it is more difficult to accept now, given the scope of the cosmos—hundreds of billions of galaxies—and our own planet with eight billion humans. But Christian theology is stuck with this god, *who knows what every human being is saying and thinking, 24/7*. He knows what every person is going through, hence this god’s tolerance of horrible suffering is inexplicable and inexcusable. If you take the New Testament seriously, god is aware of every hurt suffered by every human and every animal at every moment. But that doesn’t stop devout believers from ignoring terrible calamities in their struggle to hold onto faith.

The Great War

One of the greatest calamities in human history was the First World War. It was a world conflict that saw the use of machine guns, tanks, poison gas, flame throwers, and aircraft. In 2007, Historian G. J. Meyer published *A World Undone: The Story of the Great War, 1914–1918*. A few years later he wrote that it “seemed almost the suicide of Europe.”¹ “Death rained down (on average, fifty-five German soldiers died in every hour of the fifty-month-long conflict), killing and sparing the weak and the strong at random.”² Meyer wrote these words in an essay that was included in the 2013 edition of Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*, a novel that was published in 1929

¹ Erich Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, 219.

² Remarque, *All Quiet*, 221.

and is an important study for the devout who are inclined to shrug off World War I as being a major theological problem. Meyer also wrote:

“Remarque’s book has stood as an immovable boulder in the path of anyone wanting to portray what was arguably history’s filthiest and most utterly pointless war as anything other than filthy and pointless.”³

It also stands as an immovable boulder in the path of Christian theologians who refuse to see World War I as a challenge to their faith in a good and caring god. Remarque (1898–1970), as a German *teenager*, fought in the trenches during the war, then spent a long time recovering from his wounds. His novel is based on what he saw, experienced, and felt: “Beside me a lance-corporal has his head torn off. He runs a few steps more while the blood spouts from his neck like a fountain.”⁴

“We see men living with their skulls blown open; we see soldiers run with their two feet cut off, they stagger on their splintered stumps into the next shell-hole; a lance-corporal crawls a mile and a half on his hands dragging his smashed knee after him; another goes to the dressing station and over his clasped hands bulge his intestines; we see men without mouths, without jaws, without faces; we find one man who has held the artery of his arm in his teeth for two hours in order not to bleed to death.”⁴

“...tanks are machines, their caterpillars run on as endless as the war, they are annihilation, they roll without feeling into the craters, and climb up again without stopping, a fleet of roaring, smoke-belching armour-clads, invulnerable steel beasts squashing the dead and the wounded—we shrivel up in our thin skin before them, against their colossal weight our arms are sticks of straw, and our hand-grenades matches.”⁵

If an all-powerful, caring, and competent god had been paying close attention to *each soldier* as suggested by the New Testament, then how can the inaction of this god be explained or excused? When the suffering is so horrible and so massive, *compassion dictates that god must do something*. Otherwise, god is a joke—and “free will” is no defense whatever.

Yet another major theological problem comes to mind when we think about World War I: the major powers that fought each other so viciously considered themselves Christian nations; they worshipped and prayed to the same god, were sure that this god was on their side, and prayed to him for guidance and deliverance.

Why were the leaders of these Christian nations so focused on hatred of each other? How is it that their god couldn’t reach the minds of the Christian

³ Remarque, *All Quiet*, 220.

⁴ Remarque, *All Quiet*, 101.

⁵ Remarque, *All Quiet*, 206.

leaders of these nations with one clear and simple message: *just stop it already!* And why did they devise even more horrible instruments of war?

World War I was triggered by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914. Gavrilo Princip, a nineteen-year-old Serbian, was the gunman. By all evidence, he was acting on behalf of a small group of Serbian radicals, not the government.

But the European nations had been planning war for years. Doesn't it speak to the incoherence of Christian theology that its god wasn't able to imagine the horrible consequences—and *do something* to avert the catastrophe? There came a time when the shallowness of Christian theology was finally noticed. Barbara Tuchman, in her classic work, *A Distant Mirror*, wrote this about the aftermath of the Black Death that killed perhaps a third of the population between India and England:

“Survivors of the plague, finding themselves neither destroyed nor improved, could discover no Divine purpose in the pain they had suffered. God’s purposes were usually mysterious, but this scourge had been too terrible to be accepted without questioning. If a disaster of such magnitude, the most lethal ever known, was a mere wanton act of God or perhaps not God’s work at all, then the absolutes of a fixed order were loosed from their moorings. Minds opened to admit these questions could never again be shut. Once people envisioned the possibility of change in a fixed order, the end of the age of submission came in sight; the turn to individual conscience lay ahead. To that extent the Black Death may have been the unrecognized beginning of modern man.”⁶

Christian theology fails to make any sense in the face of other historical calamities. During the American Civil War, Christians fought other Christians savagely. But they all prayed to the same god, whose inspired holy book included texts that viewed slavery as a normative practice. Indeed, slavery was not condemned even in the Ten Commandments. More than 600,000 men died in combat during that war. In the face of these events, thoughtful people should have seen that Christian theology doesn't explain much at all.

I would suggest, however, that World War I has truly catastrophic implications for Christian theology. The death toll, military and civilian, came to almost twenty million, and the war accelerated the flu epidemic that claimed as many as fifty million lives worldwide. There were endless disagreements among the politicians and generals about tactics and strategies, resulting in bad and faulty decisions. So the horrible bloodshed, the stalemate in the trenches went on year after year. There was widespread starvation in Germany because the Allies had blocked its only sea lanes.

⁶ Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*, 129.