

Remembering the Christmas Truce of 1914, The Desire for Real Peace

How Soldiers with Newly Attuned Consciences Almost Stopped a War

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*"...and the ones who call the shots won't be among the dead and lame; And on each end of the rifle we're the same" — **John McCutcheon***

104 years ago this Christmas something happened near the beginning of the "War to End All Wars" that put a tiny little blip of hope in the historical timeline of the organized mass slaughter that is war.

The event was regarded by the professional military officer class to be so profound and so important (and so disturbing) that strategies were immediately put in place that would ensure that such an event could never happen again.

"Christian" Europe was in the fifth month of the war of 1914 - 1918, the so-called Great War that finally ground to a mutually suicidal halt after four years of exhausting trench warfare, with all of the original participants financially, spiritually and morally bankrupt.

British, Scottish, French, Belgian, Australian, New Zealand, Canadian, German, Austrian, Hungarian, Serbian and Russian clergymen from church pulpits in those Christian nations were doing their part in creating a decidedly un-Christ-like patriotic fervor that would result in a holocaust that destroyed four empires, killed upwards of 20 million soldiers and civilians, physically wounded hundreds of millions more and caused the psychological and spiritual decimation of an entire generation of young men whose spiritual care was supposed to be the responsibility of those clergymen.

Christianity, it should be remembered, began as a highly ethical pacifist religion based on the teachings and actions of the nonviolent Jesus of Nazareth (and his pacifist apostles and followers). Christianity survived and thrived despite persecutions until it became the largest religion in the Roman Empire by the time **Constantine the Great** became emperor (in 313 CE) and usurped the religion's leaders into becoming OK with the homicidal violence of warfare. Ever since then, the nations that professed Christianity as their state religion have never allowed the mainline churches to truly exercise the radical peacemaking of the original form of Christianity as Jesus had taught.

So, contrary to the ethical teachings of Jesus, most modern Christian churches have refused to become active resisters to its particular nation's militarist or imperial aspirations, its nation's aggressive wars, its nation's war-makers or its nation's war profiteers. Instead, the church has, by and large, become a bloody instrument of the satanic in support of whatever sociopathic warmongers and sociopathic corporations are in power.

So, it shouldn't come as much of a surprise to see that the religious leaders on both sides of World War I were convinced that God was on their particular side and therefore not on the side of those professed followers of Jesus that had been fingered as enemies by their nation's political leaders. **The incongruity of believing that the same god was blessing the lethal weapons and protecting the doomed sons on both sides of No-Man's Land) failed to register with the vast majority of combatants and their spiritual counselors.**

So, early in the war, pulpits and pews all over Europe reverberated with flag-waving fervor, sending clear messages to the millions of doomed warrior-sons that it was their Christian duty to march off to kill the equally doomed Christian soldiers on the other side of the line. And for the civilians back home, it was their Christian duty to "support the troops" who were destined to return home dead or wounded, psychologically and spiritually broken, disillusioned - and faithless.

A mere five months into this frustrating war (featuring trench warfare, artillery barrages, withering machine gun fire, and, soon to come, unstoppable armored tanks, aerial bombardment and poison gas), the first Christmas of the war on the Western Front offered a respite to the exhausted, freezing and demoralized troops.

Christmas was the holiest of Christian holidays and every soldier in the frozen trenches was slowly coming to the abrupt realization that war was NOT glorious (as they had been led to believe). After experiencing death, dying, hunger, frostbite, sleep deprivation, shell shock, traumatic brain injuries and homesickness, the traditional spirit of Christmas and its expectations of peace and love, had a special meaning for the troops.

Christmas reminded the soldiers of the good food, warm homes and beloved families and friends that they had left behind and which - they now suspected - they might never see again. The soldiers in the trenches desperately sought some respite from the misery of the rat, lice and corpse-infested trenches.

Some of the more thoughtful troops had begun to suspect that even if they survived the war physically, they might not survive it psychically or spiritually.

Trench Warfare in 1914

In the excitement leading up to the war, the frontline soldiers on either side had been convinced that God was on their particular side, that their nation was pre-destined to be victorious and that they would be "home before Christmas" where they would be celebrated as conquering heroes.

Instead, each frontline soldier found himself at the end of his emotional rope because of the unrelenting artillery barrages against which they were defenseless. If they weren't killed or physically maimed by the artillery shells and bombs, they would eventually be emotionally destroyed by "shell-shock" (now known as combat-induced posttraumatic stress disorder - PTSD).

The soldier-victims that witnessed a multitude of examples of battlefield cruelty logically suffered various depths of depression, anxiety, suicidality, hyper-alertness, horrifying nightmares and flashbacks (which was usually misdiagnosed as a "hallucination of unknown cause", a reality that would condemn millions of future soldiers to be mistakenly diagnosed

with schizophrenia and thus mistakenly treated with addictive, brain-altering psych drugs).

Many World War I soldiers suffered any number of traumatic mental and/or neurological abnormalities, including traumatic brain injury (TBI), which only became a diagnosable affliction several wars later.

Among the other common war-induced “killers of the soul” were the starvation, the malnutrition, the dehydration, the infections (such as typhus and dysentery), the louse infestations, the trench foot, the frostbite and the gangrenous toes and fingers. If any of the tormented survivors got back home in one piece, they would not really appreciate being treated as military heroes in memorial day parades staged in their honor. They knew – if they were being totally honest with themselves – that they were not actual heroes, but rather they were victims of a sick, delusional, greedy, militarized culture that glorified war and killing and then abandoned the deceived, wounded survivors that made it home alive. Standard operating procedure in every war.

Poison gas attacks from both sides, albeit begun by the scientifically-superior Germans, began early in 1915, and Allied tank warfare – which was a humiliating disaster for the British innovators of that new technology – wouldn’t be operational until the Battle of the Somme in 1916.

One of the most stressful and lethal realities for the frontline soldiers was the suicidal, misbegotten, “over the top” infantry assaults against the opposition’s machine gun nests. Such assaults were complicated by the presence of shell holes and the rows of coiled barbed wire that often made them sitting ducks. Artillery barrages from both sides commonly resulted in tens of thousands of casualties in a single day.

The “over the top” infantry assaults sacrificed hundreds of thousands of obedient lower-echelon soldiers in the futile efforts to gain ground. Those assaults were stupidly and repeatedly ordered by senior officers such as Sir John French and his replacement as British Commander-in-Chief, Sir Douglas Haig. Most of the old-timer generals who had fought wars in the previous century refused to admit that their outdated “horse and sabre” cavalry charges across the muck of No-Man’s Land were both hopeless and suicidal.

The general staff planners of the various disastrous attempts to end the war quickly (or at least end the stalemate) were safely out of the range of enemy artillery barrages. The national war-planners were safely back in Parliament or hiding in their castles, and their aristocratic generals were comfortably billeted in warm and dry headquarters far from the hot war, eating well, being dressed by their orderlies, drinking their tea and claret – none of them at any risk of suffering the lethal consequences of war.

Screams of pain often came from the wounded soldiers who were helplessly hanging on the barbed wire or trapped and perhaps bleeding to death in the bomb craters between the trenches. Often the dying of the wounded would linger for days, and the effect on the troops in the trenches, who had to listen to the desperate, unanswerable cries for help was always psychologically distressing. By the time Christmas came and winter hit, troop morale on both sides of No Man’s Land had hit rock bottom.

Christmas in the Trenches

So on December 24, 1914, the exhausted troops settled down to their meager Christmas

meal with, for the lucky ones, gifts from home, special food, special liquor, special chocolate bars and the hope for peace, if even for one night.

On the German side, a magnanimous (and deluded) **Kaiser Wilhelm** sent 100,000 Christmas trees with millions of ornamental candles to the front, expecting that such an act would boost German troop morale. Using the precious supply lines for such militarily unnecessary items was ridiculed by the most of the hardened officers, and nobody suspected that the Kaiser's Christmas tree idea would backfire – instead becoming a catalyst for an unplanned-for and unauthorized cease-fire, orchestrated by non-officers and unheard of in the history of warfare. The mutiny was censored out of mainstream history books for most of the next century.

The Christmas Truce of 1914 was a spontaneous, unauthorized event that happened at a number of locations all along the 600 miles of triple trenches that stretched across Belgium and France, and it was an event that would never again be duplicated, thanks to the war-profiteers, professional militarists and saber-rattling wannabes in the media, parliament and Congress who glory in their nation's "pseudo-patriotic" wars.



Twelve years ago, the movie "Joyeux Noel" (French for "Merry Christmas") received a well-deserved Academy Award nomination for best foreign film of 2005. Joyeux Noel is the moving story that was adapted from the many surviving stories that had been told in letters from soldiers who had participated in the truce. It was almost a miracle that the truth of that remarkable event survived the powerful censorship.

As told in the movie, in the darkened battlefield, some German soldier started singing the beloved Christmas hymn "Stille Nacht". Soon the British, French and Scots on the other side of No Man's Land joined in with their versions of "Silent Night". Other Christmas songs were sung, often as duets in two tongues. Before long, the spirit of peace and "goodwill towards men" prevailed over the demonic spirit of war, and the troops on both sides began to sense their common humanity. The natural human aversion to killing other humans broke through to consciousness and overcame the fear, patriotic fervor and pro-war brain-washing to which they had all been subjected.



Courageous German soldier Singing in No Man's Land (image from Joyeux Noel)

Soldiers on both sides courageously dropped their weapons, came “over the top” in peace to meet their former foes face-to-face. To get to the neutral zone, they had to climb over barbed wire, walk around shell holes and over frozen corpses (which were later to be given respectful burials during an extension of the truce, with soldiers from both sides helping one another with the gruesome task of burying their comrades).

The spirit of retaliation had been replaced by a **spirit of reconciliation and the desire for real peace**. New friends shared chocolate bars, cigarettes, wine, schnapps, soccer games and pictures from home. Addresses were exchanged, photos were taken and every soldier who genuinely experienced the emotional drama was forever changed. Suddenly there was an aversion to killing young men who deserved to be treated as they had been taught in Sunday School: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

And the generals and the politicians back home were appalled at the unexpected Christ-like behavior of the front-soldiers.



Mutinuous French, German and Scottish Lieutenants

Fostering Peace on Earth in Times of War Is an Act of Treason for Conscientious Soldiers

Fraternization with the enemy (as well as refusing to obey orders in time of war) is universally regarded by military commanders as an act of treason and a serious crime deserving of severe punishment. In most wars throughout history, such “crimes” were often

dealt with by severe beatings and often firing squad. In the case of the Christmas Truce of 1914, most commanding officers feared mutiny if severe punishments were carried out so, instead, not wanting to draw public attention to an incident that was potentially contagious and could stop the war, they censored letters home and tried to ignore the episode.

War correspondents were forbidden to report the incident to their papers. Some commanding officers threatened courts martial if fraternization persisted. They understood that getting to know and befriend a supposed enemy was bad for the carefully-orchestrated killing spirit of war.

There were punishments that were carried out against some of the most conscientious soldiers who refused to fire their rifles. The troops of French Catholic and United Kingdom Protestant persuasion naturally began questioning the moral legitimacy of the decidedly un-Christlike war and so those troops were often re-assigned to different – and less desirable – regiments.

German troops were either Lutheran or Catholic, and the consciences of many of them had been revived by the truce. Refusing to obey their orders to kill, many of them were sent to the Eastern Front where there were much harsher conditions. Separated from their Western Front comrades who had also experienced the true spirit of Christmas, they had no choice but to fight and die in the equally suicidal battles against their Russian Orthodox Christian co-religionists. Very few Allied or German soldiers who experienced the Christmas Truce of 1914 survived the war.

If humanity is truly concerned with the barbaric nature of militarism, and if our modern-era false flag-generated wars of empire are to be effectively derailed, the story of the Christmas Truce of 1914 needs to be retold over and over again – and taken to heart.

The satanic nature of war became obvious to the ones who experienced the Christmas Truce in 1914, but war-mongers and war profiteers have been trying to cover it up ever since. Flag-waving patriotism and telling exaggerated stories of military heroism have worked well to glorify what is blatantly inglorious.

Both ancient and modern wars have been glorified in every nation's history textbooks but, if civilization is to survive, war needs to be exposed as demonic. Violence begets violence. Wars are contagious, universally futile, and never truly end; and their extremely high costs always results in a very poor return on investment- except for the banks and the weapons-manufacturers.

Modern American wars are now being fought by thoroughly indoctrinated, post-adolescent, Call of Duty-type first person shooter gamers who liked the adrenalin high of killing virtual "bad guys" in a videogame. Sadly, unbeknownst to them, they are at high risk of having their emotional and spiritual lives negatively and permanently altered by the physical, mental and spiritual damage that always comes from participating in actual homicidal violence.

Combat war can easily doom its participants to a life overwhelmed by the wounds of war (PTSD, sociopathic personality disorder, suicidality, homicidality, loss of religious faith, traumatic brain injury, malnutrition from the highly processed military food, autoimmune disorders because of the military's over-vaccination programs with neurotoxic aluminum-containing vaccines (especially the anthrax series) and addictive drug use [either legal or

illegal]). What is most important to realize is that all those lethal effects are totally preventable.

Christian Church Leadership has an Ethical Duty to Warn it's Prospective Cannon Fodder Soldiers About the Potential for Spiritual Suicide if They Participate in Combat

It seems to me that it would be helpful if moral leadership in America, especially its church leaders and its Christian parents, would discharge their duty to thoroughly warn the children and adolescents in their sphere of influence about all of the serious consequences of being in the killing professions. Jesus, who commanded his followers to "love your enemies", would surely approve.

Without such countervailing truths being told by a nation's moral leadership, war planners have an easy time keeping potential soldiers from recognizing the humanity of those that are accused of being enemies, whether they are Syrians, Iranians, Iraqis, Afghanis, Russians, Vietnamese, Chinese or North Koreans. I have been repeatedly told by military veteran friends of mine that military chaplains - who are supposed to be nurturers of the souls of the soldiers that are in their "care" - never bring up, in their counseling sessions, the Golden Rule, Jesus' clear "love your enemies" commands, his many ethical teachings in the Sermon on the Mount or the biblical commandments that say "thou shalt not kill" or "thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's oil".

The Church's Theological Blind Spots When the Pro-War Flag-waving Begins

One theological blind spot about war was nicely illustrated near the end of "Joyeux Noel" in a powerful scene depicting a confrontation between the Christ-like, altruistic, antiwar, lowly Scottish chaplain and his pro-war over-privileged Anglican bishop. As the humble chaplain was mercifully administering the "last rites" to a dying soldier, he was approached by the bishop, who had come to chastise the chaplain for fraternizing with the enemy during the Christmas Truce. The bishop summarily relieved the simple pastor of his chaplaincy duties because of his "treasonous and shameful" Christ-like behavior on the battlefield.

The authoritarian bishop refused to listen to the chaplain's story about his having performed "the most important mass of my life" (with enemy troops participating in the celebration) or the fact that he wished to stay with the soldiers that needed him because they were losing their faith in God. The bishop angrily denied the chaplain's request to remain with his men.



Christmas Eve Mass, France

The bishop then delivered a rousing pro-war, jingoistic sermon (which was taken word-for-word from a homily that had actually been delivered by an Anglican bishop later in the war). The sermon was addressed to the fresh troops that had to be brought in to replace the veteran soldiers who had suddenly become averse to killing, and were refusing to fire on the “enemy”.

The image of the dramatic but subtle response of the chaplain to his sacking should be a clarion call to the Christian church leadership – both clergy and lay – of every militarized, so-called “Christian” nation. This chaplain, after listening to the bishop’s sermon, simply hung up his cross and walked out of the door of the field hospital.

“Joyeux Noël” is an important film that deserves to be annual holiday viewing. It has ethical lessons far more powerful than the traditional fare of “It’s A Wonderful Life” or “A Christmas Carol”.

One of the lessons of the story is summarized in the concluding verse of John McCutcheon’s famous song about the event: “Christmas in the Trenches”:

“My name is Francis Tolliver, in Liverpool I dwell.

Each Christmas come since World War One, I’ve learned its lessons well:
That the ones who call the shots won’t be among the dead and lame
And on each end of the rifle we’re the same.”

Check out the video of McCutcheon singing his song below.

Here is a critical scene from the movie:

Additional scenes from the movie, with the narration of a letter from one of the soldiers

involved can be viewed below.

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