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THE RELIGION  
FOR THE  
SOLDIER

Major The Rev. Thurlow Fraser, D.D.

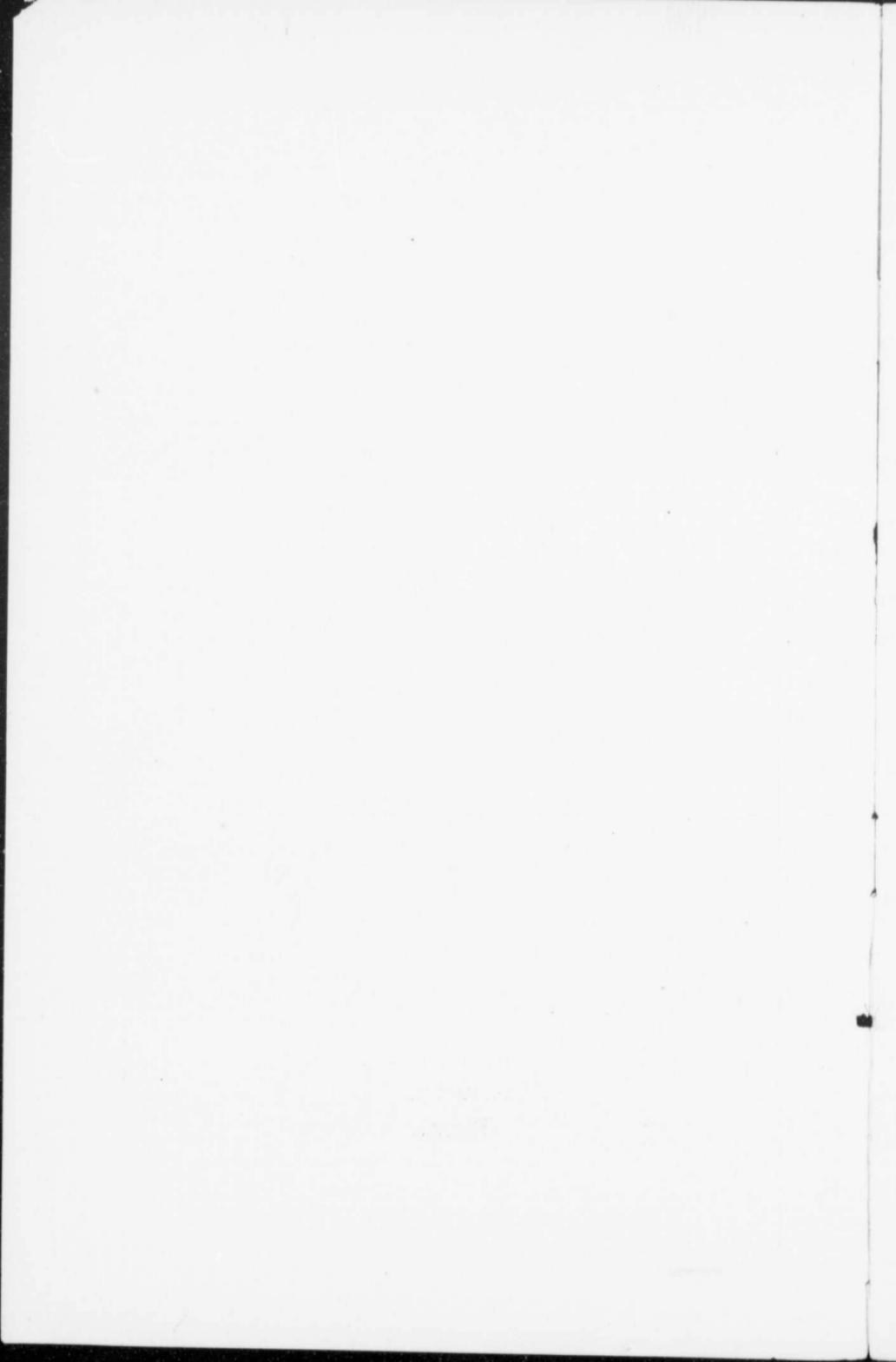


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# The Religion for the Soldier

## I. The Soldiers' Religion or Irreligion

Much has been said and written about the religious life of our soldiers in this war. Almost all of these accounts may be assigned to one or other of two classes, the very optimistic, and the very pessimistic. Comparatively few could be entered in a less romantic, but more accurate, category which forms the mean between these two extremes.

Good people at home have thought that the men who daily face death, who daily see it strike down their comrades by their sides, and know that their own chances of surviving are daily growing less and less, must of necessity have their minds solemnized by the terrible experiences through which they pass. They think that these men must surely repent of their sins, and make very evident preparation for death and another life. Distinguished strangers, bishops and other church dignitaries, who visit the camps on a Sunday, see the men drawn up in hollow squares at compulsory church parades, reverent and attentive, hear them reading the responses, joining in the prayers and hymns with a zeal and power of voice which would put home congregations to shame, give most favourable reports of the state of mind of the men in khaki towards things spiritual.

On the other hand not a few combatant officers who have looked upon the men and dealt with them simply as units in a fighting force, who have heard their language, been worried by their slackness, had to settle their disputes and listen to their complaints, who have had to enforce discipline, and keep them out of trouble with the inhabitants, whether in England or France or Flanders, will tell you that religion does not count over there. One such officer, just returned after more than two years in the trenches, said to me recently:—"That's one thing the men don't take much stock in at the front, religion." The medical officer, compelled to know the inner history of quite a few men of his unit, is apt to think and say that they are all alike, all given to the sins of the flesh. Some of the war-correspondents describe the British soldiers as equally hard-fighting and hard-swearing, and attribute to the Canadians more than average distinction in both. The stock stories which are fast becoming heirlooms of several generations of soldiers, nearly all picture the Canadian as a fluent swearer.

## II. Unsafe Generalizations

Both of these conceptions of the religion or irreligion of the soldiers are untrue to facts; untrue because they are exaggerations or generalizations which will not fit all, or even a majority of cases. In the first place the thought of death, the probability of death in a few hours, does not necessarily make men change their ways, or even incline them to forsake the habits of a life-time. To men who are face to face with it all the time, death becomes a common-place; a disagreeable one, it is true, like the mud, or the wet dug-outs, or the vermin which inhabit them; but a common-place just the same, because they are meeting it every day. There is always the chance, even in a big show, that a man will come through all right. If he is hit, the chances are five to one that he will not be killed; just be wounded enough to make Blighty, and be nursed and perhaps lionized a bit, and before he is fit again probably the war will be done. It is easier to take any of these chances than it is to repent and change the whole manner of his life. The prospect of death is not of necessity an effective agency in conversion, any more than the attendance of the men at a compulsory church parade is an evidence of their interest in religion.

Fortunately no more true is the generalization of the combatant officer or medical officer or newspaper correspondent, who depicts the soldier as having no use for religion. An officer may know a lot about his men as fighters; he may be thoroughly efficient and entirely capable of leading them in action or teaching them all the details of trench warfare. But he may never have come close enough to them to be made their confidant; he may never have had them bring their little valuables and keepsakes to be sent to a mother, a wife or a sweetheart in case they did not come out, or been given the message of comfort they wanted delivered. Naturally he judges the men by the side he sees and has to deal with. He scarcely knows of the existence of this other side. And when ever and anon it crops out, he is surprised to find that it is there. One day in an officers' mess after the chaplain had gone out, the adjutant, who has since been killed in the Somme, said:—"Do you know that old Padre of ours who has been with the battalion only a few months, knows the men better than we do, who have been with it from the beginning? And the men will go to him when they want anything, rather than to any of us." It was because the chaplain had recognized this other side of the men's characters, and had appealed to it.

In the same way a medical officer knows the inner history of five or more per cent. of his battalion who may have had

to come to him for care. But he knows little or nothing of the conduct of the more than ninety per cent. who have never come, and never needed to come. The fact that he has had to treat the black sheep, and guard against the malingerers, inclines to make him suspicious and harsh in his judgments,

Similarly the war-correspondent passing through the lines, paying a hasty visit to a camp, or given a Cook's tour of the trenches under the guidance of a staff officer, does not necessarily get an intimate knowledge of the soldiers. He hears the one or two men of a group who may be swearing vigorously, and their picturesque language, or suggestive blanks, add spice to his next article. But he does not hear, and does not report the half dozen men of the same group who are not swearing at all.

These broad, general statements which depict the men in khaki as all saints or all notorious sinners, are unsafe guides in estimating the character of our soldiers. Even Donald Hankey makes his too strong when he says of his somewhat unsophisticated chaplain, that he was much disappointed when "The men still appeared to be the same careless, indifferent heathen that they had always been." (A Student in Arms, p. 102.) I do not know how that fits an English battalion. Lieut. Hankey doubtless understood very intimately the men with whom he served both in the ranks and as a commissioned officer. But I do know that in every Canadian battalion with which I had any acquaintance, I found a considerable proportion of earnest, thoughtful, religious men. The fact that they found themselves amid the terrible scenes of a world war did not destroy their faith or change their conduct. They were good Christians, and as a rule, good soldiers.

### **III. The Classes of the Canadian Army**

Here then we have the first fact which we must remember about our Canadian army. Many of our soldiers were deeply religious men to begin with. The pick of the young men of our churches enlisted. Some churches have not an eligible young man left. Our universities have lost the majority of their male students. I went into one hut to find a soldier friend. Of twenty-eight men in that hut there was only one who was not a graduate or under-graduate of one of our great universities. These were all privates or non-commissioned officers. In an engineer unit of 250 men there were 200 from one university. The famous Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry battalion has been largely kept up to strength by successive drafts of university men. These student soldiers were not only well educated, but many of them were sincerely and consistently religious. A consider-

able proportion of them were preparing for the ministry of various churches. In one battery I found eleven students from one of our own theological colleges. In another unit of 250 men I was told that there were five ordained ministers serving as privates, including a splendid young minister of our own Church. The Canadian Chaplain Service is now drawing a large number of its recruits from these young ministers, who have served their apprenticeship in the ranks. There are Sunday School teachers, superintendents, elders, a few ministers of our own Church, as well as officials and ministers of other churches, serving both in the ranks and as officers. These men have not lost their religion because they have found themselves in the army.

Alongside of them are men of every occupation, of every life story, of every variety of training, of religious or irreligious opinion. There is as much romance hidden away in the histories of the men of the Canadian Expeditionary Force as there is in those of the soldiers of the Foreign Legion of France. Consequently no general statement can be made which will apply to all, or even to a large majority of our soldiers. There is too much diversity.

There is, however, one class which constitutes so large a proportion of the men of our army, that it may be dealt with as the most representative single group in the force. It consists of the young Canadians of from eighteen to twenty-five years of age, or thereabout, who have gone from our homes, our shops, our factories, our banks, our schools, our colleges. Wherever they may have come from, they are at an impressionable and formative period in their lives. How are they being affected by the war, and what bearing will it have on their religious life?

#### **IV. The War's Impress on Their Religion**

They are being made serious by it. They have suffered hardship. They have seen their comrades slain. They have met death face to face many a time. They have asked themselves why this unutterable woe has come upon the world; why they are compelled to suffer so. To them the tinsel and the gilding have been stripped off many a hoary farce, which we have borne with because our fathers bore with it before us. They see things in their reality as they never saw them before. Every public question and every public man will have to reckon with these young men, who have been thinking while they fought, thinking because they suffered. Many a laughing, heedless boy who went away, is coming back a serious-minded, independent, self-reliant man, with more independence and self-reliance than perhaps his father has attained

at middle-age. I recently asked a newspaper man who was thrown much into contact with returned soldiers, what was the outstanding characteristic he noticed in them. He replied instantly, "Their seriousness." He was right. There will be no more serious, thoughtful, independent element in the population of Canada than the men who have long fought and suffered in the trenches, and eventually will get the chance to return. The Church and religion will have to reckon with this new element.

They are not greatly concerned about doctrines, and they care very little for denominational differences. What appeals to them is the manhood of a religious man, no matter what his doctrines or his Church may be. I have known the men of an almost entirely Protestant battalion to object strenuously when they heard that its chaplain, a Roman Catholic priest, was likely to be removed. He had been with them in battle, he had knelt beside them when wounded, and irrespective of creeds and careless of forms, had pointed both Catholics and Protestants to Christ as their Saviour. When there was no Protestant chaplain immediately available, he had buried their dead as tenderly as his own. For the very same reason I have known a big Irish Roman Catholic soldier to challenge any man of another battalion to single combat, because some of them had spoken slightly of his chaplain, who was a Presbyterian.

The barriers which ordinarily divide us at home, the traditional suspicions and jealousies, the trivialities of names and forms, broke down before the sense of brotherhood in a common cause, the stress of trying to meet an overwhelming need. The Protestants conducted their work in a very large measure as if they were all one. The church parades at the front were all union services for all Protestant denominations. The communion services in a very large measure were the same. I have dispensed the sacrament of the Lord's Supper to men of probably every Christian faith represented at the front. I have received the sacrament at the hands of Anglicans, Baptists, Congregationalists, Methodists and Presbyterians. At every communion service conducted by a military chaplain at which I was present, a cordial invitation was extended to all believers, irrespective of their church connection, to partake.

It is true that not all chaplains attained to that freedom. Some continued to be bound by the fetters of traditional claims and prerogatives. But the men did not care. They judged by a different standard than that of a church and its claims. At a communion held last Christmas, of 100 men present more than fifty had marched past the place of communion

of their own Church, to attend communion administered by a chaplain of another Church, because they knew him better. He had been with them longer, and in battle with them more, than their own. Where men had not had a chance to receive the communion for a considerable time, they frequently came to the chaplain and asked when it would be possible for them to receive it, and it never seemed to trouble them in the slightest if he did not belong to the same Church as they did.

As a rule soldiers are not very regular in the performance of any routine of religious observances. Their mode of life is not conducive to it. Crowded together in tents and huts, in barns and stables and make-shift bivouacs, in trenches and dug-outs, it is not easy to pray or to read the Bible according to rule. A man is too tired when he gets a chance to lie down; and too tired still when he has to get up again. There is no possibility of quiet or privacy. I doubt if even the most methodical of our saints would be very regular in his devotions under the same circumstances.

But that does not mean that they never pray. An Alberta battalion had gone through a frightful gruelling near Ypres last June. After they came out a chaplain went to and fro among them, asking how they had fared. Out of a big group one young soldier spoke out distinctly:—"If I never prayed before, Sir, I sure did pray that time." "So did I." "So did I." His companions were not ashamed to acknowledge that they, too, had prayed in their hour of need. Men going into action have given the chaplain a quick, strong grip of the hand and said:—"Will you put up a word for me, Sir?" or, "Don't forget me, Sir." And some have asked him, if they did not come back, to write to the folk at home and tell them that "it is all right."

Both officers and men are a bit shy about acknowledging that they ever pray, except in the somewhat formal prayers of the church parade. That is one of the things about which it is not considered good form to talk. But once in a while a bit of light breaks through revealing a different aspect of their characters from that they ordinarily put forward.

This happened in the Somme. A battalion commander had been promoted to a brigade, and was leaving the men with whom he had been in the trenches for nearly eighteen months. He called the officers together and spoke a few words. Among other things he said in effect the following:—"I didn't always go over the top with you. It wasn't necessary. But when all our dispositions were made and you had everything in hand, I used to go into my dug-out and get into wireless communication with Headquarters, a greater

Headquarters than even the G. H. Q.\* And, Gentlemen, more of your success than perhaps you think, was due to that." When the motor had whirled him away, one of the gayest young officers of the battalion said to the rest:—"The old man has been in some hot places, but he never did a braver thing than to stand up before us and tell us that he was praying for us when we were going over." And they appreciated it. That commander is an elder in our Church.

There are other elements of true religion in which the soldiers have little to learn from us. Rather we have to learn from them. Such is their sense of duty. It is easy to do one's duty, when duty involves no hardship or suffering. But when duty means what these men are bearing every day, there are few of us in a position to instruct them on its meaning. A chaplain was talking to a young soldier last Christmas. The chaplain knew his people, and knew that the girl of his choice was waiting in Canada for the young soldier to come home. He said:—"Well, Bob, I suppose Canada would look pretty good to you now." "It sure would," was the reply. "You know how good it would look to me. But I would not go home now, even if I could. Some of us have to see this thing through, and I might as well as any one else." That young soldier has been in the army since the first week of the war, and two years and nine months continuously at the front. He was wounded recently. He is a fair sample of thousands of young Canadians who never dreamed of being soldiers, till this war of right against wrong called them to the battle-fields.

Along with this sense of duty there goes of necessity a new spirit of self-sacrifice. In one of the battles of the Somme last September a soldier of a western battalion went twelve times over the parapet in one day, in full view of the enemy, and each time brought in a wounded man. In the fighting near Lens this summer a runner of the same battalion had an arm blown completely off, while carrying a message through a terrific barrage. Another who was sent with a copy of the message, was killed. Two hours later the first one, with the stump of his arm roughly bound up, staggered into his destination, delivered his message, and was carried dying to a Field Ambulance.

The boys who have again and again risked their own lives going out into No-Man's-Land to save the lives of their wounded comrades, who lying wounded in shell-hole or dug-out, have given their last fragment of chocolate, or biscuit, or mouthful of bully to one who needed it worse, have not

\*G.H.Q.—General Headquarters: the headquarters of Sir Douglas Haig, the Commander-in-Chief.

suffered in vain. No one but those who have cared for them, will ever know how patiently and uncomplainingly they have borne the agony of their wounds. The men who have thus learned to forget themselves for the sake of others, are in that measure, whether they are conscious of it or not, walking in the footsteps of the highest and holiest Manhood the earth has ever known.

## V. The Religion of Reality

These young men are coming back to us by hundreds and thousands. There is no use stating exact numbers, for the numbers change every week with fresh ship-loads landed on our shores. They have given their splendid strength, the perfection of their physical manhood for their country. Most of them are broken men, no longer fit for active service, no longer capable of doing the work they did before they went away. What message have we for them?

The first thing is to help them to get re-established in the way of making a livelihood. The Dominion and Provincial Governments have inaugurated excellent schemes for aiding returned soldiers, and especially for training in new trades those whose wounds have incapacitated them from following their former occupations. Many returned soldiers will need information, advice, encouragement to take advantage of what the authorities have provided, and to persist in their efforts until they are in a position to make a good living for themselves in spite of their disabilities. Then it will be necessary in many cases to help them to find situations which they can satisfactorily fill.

Above all, whether the men are still at the front, or invalided to England, or returned to Canada as unfit for further service, we must see that their families lack nothing while they are unable to give them care. In response to a letter on this subject sent to chaplains at the front, a number of them consulted together, and one writes:—"They emphatically agreed that whatever might be done for soldiers on their return home, the Church had her chance now to care for the soldiers' families." This might not mean financial help. The state is providing fairly well for that. It does mean kindly interest, friendship, and loving sympathy. There is nothing which so eats into the soul of a soldier as the thought that while he is fighting for his country, his family is suffering for the lack of a friend. The Church can supply this need.

This is the practical gratitude we owe them. This is the practical Christianity which will appeal to them. They know what duty, service and self-sacrifice mean. They know their

reality. We have often talked about these virtues. We must show that we know their reality, too. In many places as soon as the reception and speeches and shouting are over, the returned and broken soldiers are being left to sink or swim as best they may. As leaders of public thought and action, as prompters of the public conscience, we must see that this does not happen in our communities.

This is the reality of religion which will appeal to the soldiers. Nothing but reality will do. Many of the soldiers have their faults, God knows; some of them terrible faults; sins of the flesh and the appetites of which most of us have never been guilty. But they have also their virtues, self-denial, self-sacrifice, the love which lays down one's life for a friend, to which most of us have not attained. We must try to relate their virtues to Jesus Christ: to prove that from Him we have learned the same spirit, though the same opportunity to manifest it has not come to us as came to them. And when they have learned Christ, the great exemplar of their noblest virtues, He will correct their faults.

These men are worth winning, not only for their own sakes, but for their influence upon others. They are the most virile of our young manhood; in many cases the natural leaders in the communities and classes to which they belong. Otherwise they would never have voluntarily enlisted. When they come home, they will be still more leaders. Whatever the adults may think of them, they will be heroes to the boys and youths who were just too young to go. The Church cannot afford to neglect these men.

I have been repeatedly asked if Lieutenant Donald Hankey's book, *A Student in Arms*, is true to the life of our army; especially if the chapter entitled "The Religion of the Inarticulate," correctly represents the religious life of the soldiers. I have not the slightest doubt that it is true of the religious life of an English battalion, particularly a battalion composed largely of Londoners. But when applied to our Canadian army it must be subjected to considerable modification. In the ranks of the Canadian army there is much greater variety of class and training and education than in an English force. Teachers and scholars, university men and theological students, business and professional men fight side by side in the ranks with artisans, miners, lumbermen and farm labourers. The majority of these men are not alienated from the Church as the mass of the English soldiers would appear to be. Neither are they so ignorant of essential religion, nor do they imagine that it consists in a routine of church observances, as is there suggested was the thought of the English soldier. Further, though the Canadian chaplains

have their own trials, discouragements and difficulties, they are by no means so unsophisticated or out of touch with the lives and thoughts of the men, as Hankey's English chaplain appears to be.

When we keep these facts in mind, that chapter on "The Religion of the Inarticulate," and indeed the whole book, forms a very valuable guide in the study of the mind of the soldier. One thing on which the author dwells, cannot be emphasized too much. That is reality in religion. Neither doctrines nor denominationalism, emotion nor unction will satisfy these young men who are coming back to us, made serious and thoughtful by suffering. They have known the realities of hardships and privations, wounds and death there. They will demand from us the reality of deeds rather than words here.