

Women and Religious Organizations in World War I

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World War I brought some unique challenges to Britain's religious organizations and communities. Prior to 1914 British social and political culture had been saturated by religious ideas and practices, but four years of war left many Britons questioning their faith and doubting their religious leaders. Others subsumed their concerns in a flurry of activity. The response of religious institutions to the war emergency was immediate, and the work provided by their women members was extensive, but most of it has received little scholarly attention (Wilkinson, Marrin, de Vries). The Women at Work Collection contains a variety of documents that can illuminate this largely untold story.

In 1914, the (Anglican) Church of England remained the established church in England and Wales and a constituent part of the British political landscape. Its leaders exerted their spiritual influence on temporal affairs through their membership in the House of Lords. Church attendance continued to be strong, and confidence appeared to be reaching an all-time high. Tellingly, in 1896 the Student Volunteer Union (the missionary wing of the Student Christian Movement) adopted as its slogan "The Evangelisation of the World in this Generation" – which it boldly carried into the Great War (but abruptly dropped in 1918.) Similarly, among dissenting Christian denominations, membership continued to grow in absolute numbers before World War I. Nearly three-quarters of all working-class children attended Wesleyan or Methodist Sunday schools for their basic education, and at the same time learned the key elements of the Christian faith. Roman Catholics could also cite a record of steady expansion. The nineteenth-century onslaughts of Darwinism, positivism, and higher criticism of the Bible had not brought the collapse of organized religion that some had expected (although the thrills of urban living may have been having some deleterious effects.) Even Jews — who for centuries were considered religious outsiders within Britain — were experiencing increasing acceptance, prosperity and prominence. (Feldman)

Much of the strength of religious institutions stemmed from the continued loyalty and hard work of women. At all levels of Victorian society, women were more likely than men to be actively

involved in a church or chapel, making up the majority of membership in most Christian denominations. They cleaned the buildings, washed the communion dishes, raised funds, ran charities and generally performed all the essential but unrecognised tasks of religious life. Increasingly, women served as missionaries overseas, in which capacity they enjoyed a great deal of autonomy. But rarely were their roles given official sanction. On the eve of World War I, women were still barred from serving as representatives to the lay councils of the Anglican Church, and the long struggle for women's ordination was just being launched by a group of suffragist women who believed that the Church, like the State, should officially recognize women's gifts for leadership. (Heeney) In most nonconformist denominations, women's spiritual gifts were less circumscribed; in the Salvation Army, for example, women enjoyed nearly equal functions to men, and in some Methodist circles the occasional woman might be heard teaching or even preaching on a Sunday morning. But, generally, women funnelled their religious impulses into one of the many religiously affiliated social service and charity organizations, many of which are profiled in the Women and Work Collection.

The pervasive influence of Britain's religious communities and organizations is often overlooked by scholars of World War I, for a variety of reasons. These organizations provided essential - but sometimes mundane - services, and their motivations and goals were often at odds with our own contemporary values. As the collection reveals, the wartime generation placed a high value on religious belief and participation, but as historian Sarah Williams has noted, recent scholarship far too often emphasizes the secularising process over the persistence of belief. (Williams, 1-23) Reflecting the embedded nature of religion and religious organizations within Britain's social fabric and their contributions to all aspects of war mobilization, no separate section on these topics exists in this collection. Researchers will instead find information scattered throughout the other sections, with the bulk of it appearing in "Benevolent Organisations." Drawing on their pre-war strength, churches, chapels and synagogues provided the constituencies and organizational structures necessary for mobilizing men and women to service.

After the war, however, many in the World War I generations would comment that the churches' response was inadequate to the enormity of the challenge. Scholars frequently note that World War I reshaped national attitudes toward religion, accelerating (if not initiating) the trend away from regular attendance, theological orthodoxy, and consistent tithing. In 1914, clergymen were still viewed as the nation's moral leaders, with special standing within the community, but too often they squandered that respect during this moment of national crisis. Frequently clergy

explained the failures or successes of the war in terms of divine punishments or rewards, a message that would later seem overly harsh and simplistic. The emotional and spiritual challenges posed by the war were often met with a barrage of nationalistic and patriotic sentiment, proclaimed from the pulpits and declared within the Christian press. With their ability to inspire and direct, clergy proved to be some of the most powerful recruiters of men and women to the war effort. The rhetorical warfare of Rev. A. F. Winnington-Ingram, Bishop of London, for example, motivated thousands of men to volunteer for military service. (Wilkinson, 8ff) [\[Benevolent Organisations 3/10/97\]](#) Yet, as disillusionment and war weariness set in, clergy were blamed as much as politicians and generals for their failure of wise leadership.

Of course, more moderate voices also existed within the nation's religious institutions, and many of them can be found within the Women and Work Collection. Like their non-sectarian counterparts, religious organizations responded with creativity and compassion to the rising needs around them. In many cases, their contributions differed little from those of secular organizations. The YWCA, Church Army, Scottish Churches and many other such groups whose records are included in the Women and Work Collection, sponsored hundreds of recreation huts for soldiers stationed at home and abroad. [eg. [Benevolent Organisations 3/6/76](#)] The Salvation Army worked with Belgian authorities to provide facilities for Allied convalescents. The Friends' Society, Salvation Army, and various Anglican and Catholic sisterhoods provided beds and meals for Belgian refugees. [\[Belgium, 1/1-1/5\]](#) Hundreds of parishes mobilized on behalf of their local troops, forming sewing circles, Red Cross clubs, and supply depots. One Wesleyan Church in Benton ran a Soldiers' Entertainment Fund, serving 60,880 cups of free coffee between August 1916 and November 1917 to 27,446 soldiers stationed in their town. [\[Local Records, 36/2\]](#)

One religious organization whose reach could be felt in almost all aspects of war mobilization and relief was the Church Army (CA), founded in 1882 as an Anglican version of the Salvation Army. [\[Benevolent Organisations, 3/6/1-103\]](#) For decades, it had run rescue and reformatory homes, temperance homes, fresh air homes, clubs for women and girls, maternity homes, boarding and lodging homes, and many other shelters and clubs, all out of a belief that evangelism and social uplift were fundamentally intertwined. The CA Women's Training College turned out scores of "devout and well-trained" lay workers for service in local parishes, many of whom were drawn from the working classes. Their work with fallen, homeless, fatherless and other "at risk" women and girls during the war was invaluable. The Church

Army's branch for young men – the Church Lad's Brigade – trained its members to be “good Churchmen and good patriots,” and by 1914 had produced more than 500,000 young men for service. Needless to say, many of them volunteered to fight, and the lists of casualties in the CA publications became a regular feature. In late July 1914, *The Church Army Review* published editorials condemning “the awful scourge of war,” but once hostilities were underway, the organization immediately and uncritically joined the effort, continuing all of its prewar initiatives and launching additional ones. With generous donations, the Church Army by 1918 had spawned employment agencies, emigration services (mainly for women), and the Guild of Friends for Disabled and Shell-Shocked Soldiers.

Many of Britain's religious organizations were run specifically by and for women, and the war offered them an opportunity to expand their mission beyond the usual rescue and charity work. For example, the Baptist Women's League (some of whose papers are included in this collection: [Benevolent Organisations 3/1/2](#)) refocused their work on ministering to the French Protestants affected by the hostilities. For those displaced by the fighting, the Baptist women helped to find replacement lodging and provided donations of food, clothing, books and other supplies collected at their central depot at the Baptist Church House in London. Elsewhere, they helped to sponsor recreation huts specifically geared for nonconformist soldiers. The Baptist women were especially proud to have helped establish the first nonconformist place of worship in Baghdad. [\[Benevolent Organizations, 3/1/3 p.2\]](#)

Similarly, the Catholic Women's League (CWL) tended to focus on the needs of Catholics, both at home and abroad. Their extensive records reveal the details of their hugely successful fund-raising campaigns for the Red Cross, refugee assistance and recreation huts at home and abroad. [\[Benevolent Organisations 3/2\]](#) Through the Chaplain's Fund, they sent donations of rosaries, prayer books and crucifixes to the warfront for distribution among the soldiers. But despite their strong confessional loyalties, the war clearly helped these Catholic women to move beyond their usual circles and to link up with non-Catholic and municipal organizations. The CWL Annual Report for 1915 applauded this trend, observing that Catholic women had “amply proved their utility and efficiency as loyal citizens.” [\[Benevolent Organisations, 3/2/4 p.2\]](#) Notably, many women's religious organizations expanded their membership during the war, suggesting the respect they were given by the British public.

Additional evidence can be found within these documents of the gradual breakdown of denominational exclusivity during the war. Anglican, nonconformist, Catholic and Jewish women all found themselves working together for a common cause, cooperating in relief and refugee work. Whether such inter-denominational collaboration continued after the war and led to greater tolerance and understanding are questions needing yet more research. Despite the common *esprit de corps*, for example, tensions sometimes flared and social distinctions remained among the various religious groups. One can't help but note the impatient tone of one account written by a well-meaning Anglican woman who, during the course of her work to resettle Belgian refugees, encountered a devout Belgian Jew who refused to ride in a car or train because it was a special feast day. So the woman was forced to find a male volunteer to accompany him on the long walk to the refugee centre, only to discover at the end that the fellow had been mistaken about his feast dates. ([Belgium, 2/2/15 p.24](#)) To diminish the frequency of these awkward encounters, the Jewish community in London stepped in, working independently on private donations to care for thousands of Jewish refugees. Likewise, the Catholic Women's League also served as a strong advocate of the special needs of Catholics, working in cooperation with the War Refugees Committee in Aldwych to make sure that Catholic refugees were supplied with rosaries and crucifixes. [[Benevolent Organisations 3/2/3 p.14](#)] Four years of war could not diminish such longstanding confessional differences.

As one might expect, religious organizations tended to define wartime needs as not only physical and emotional, but also moral and spiritual. The upkeep of the nation's morals was a particular area of concern for many Christian religious organizations. In this collection, researchers can survey the work of *The Challenge: The Illustrated Church Weekly*, [[Benevolent Organisations 2/39/12](#)] for example, which organized several ventures to counteract "evil tendencies" and win the war of words and images. They sent thousands of pictures to chaplains at the front, to decorate mess tents and recreation huts and to replace less edifying images. Through their Soldiers' Book Fund, they shipped barrels of books (with titles like *The Meaning of Prayer*, *Hope in Suffering*, and *Purity*) to soldiers stationed in France, Belgium and as far away as India, East Africa and Mesopotamia. *The Challenge* also established more than 100 lending libraries at home to provide wholesome reading for women munitions workers and those stationed "in lonely parts of the country." After the war, many of these libraries were taken over by YWCA clubs and Women's Institutes. [[Benevolent Organisations, 2/39](#)] Other religious organizations used similar tactics, but for different outcomes: namely, to undermine enemy morale. The British and Foreign Bible Society distributed to Britain's adversaries millions of Bibles, translated into a

variety of languages, presumably with the hope that Germans might recognize the virtue of the Allied cause if they would just read the Bible for themselves. [[Benevolent Organisations, 2/40/5](#)]

The documents in this collection clearly point to the growing prominence and stature of women within religious organizations. Their donations of time, money and initiative were crucial to the success of voluntary relief efforts and gradually gained official recognition. While the battle for ordination within the Anglican Church was just getting started, it would receive a boost during the war from women's participation in the National Mission for Repentance and Hope, a revival-style series of meetings organized by the Anglican Church in 1916 in which women played key leadership roles. The war years also brought the first ordination of a woman to the British Congregational Church. The evidence in this collection suggests that, despite the spiritual challenges posed by the war, religious organizations continued to play essential roles in British society and that women were well-suited to lead them.

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