

## Review of *The Great and Holy War* by Philip Jenkins

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*The Great and Holy War: How World War I Became a Religious Crusade.* By Philip Jenkins. New York: Harper One, 2014. 448 pages. \$29.99.

Over the last dozen years historian Philip Jenkins has done more than anyone to popularize ideas about the new demographic configuration of Christianity in the world: the decline of the Church in the West and its rise in the Global South. Especially important is his trilogy of books on this subject: *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 2012), *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (2006), and *God's Continent: Christianity, Islam, and Europe's Religious Crisis* (2007). To this already impressive body of work he has now added *The Great and Holy War*, a book about how World War I was the occasion for a religious revolution that recast the world's religions into their current shape.

The war, which began a century ago on July 28, 1914, was understood by most combatants in religious terms, and religious language and iconography were suffused in the conflict to an extent that today would be inconceivable. Both sides demonized their opponents and used the medieval imagery of knights and crusaders, believing that they were engaged in a cosmic conflict. German Protestant ministers preached that their nation had a messianic role to play in Europe. The French believed that fallen soldiers arose from the dead—“*Debout les Morts!*”—to help their living comrades in arms. Soldiers on both sides reported angels and saints appearing in the midst of battle to help their side. The

Germans often saw the archangel Michael, while the English saw St. George, and the French Joan of Arc. Peasant girls in Portugal famously saw a vision of Mary at Fátima in 1917, but both Russian and French soldiers also saw visions of the Virgin during the war. Above all, this was a time of apocalyptic signs, the most striking being the British success under General Sir Edmund Allenby in capturing Palestine and entering Jerusalem. The crucial battle against the Turks was fought near the hill of Megiddo—Armageddon itself.

Sixty-eight percent of all Christians lived in Europe at the beginning of the war. Today the number of Christians living in Europe as a percentage of population can be counted in the single digits in most European countries. Orthodox Christianity nearly became extinct during the Soviet era in Russia, which began during the war, and numerous Christian communities in the Middle East continue to be threatened with extinction, a process that began with the Armenian genocide of 1915. On the other hand, Christianity in Africa has experienced explosive growth in recent decades, and if current trends continue Africa will have more Christians than any other continent by 2030, a success story that Jenkins traces to the disruptions of the war era. For Muslims the war was traumatic in that they saw the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire and the loss of the caliphate in Istanbul, loosing the Islamic extremism that continues until today. And of course for Jews WWI was a breathtaking game changer as the Balfour Declaration of 1917 paved the way for the creation of the modern State of Israel.

Quite simply, World War I redrew the religious map of the world. Understanding how this happened and its continuing implications for today is the thrust of Jenkins's lucid, insightful, and always fascinating narrative.