

French Protestant Attitudes to the First World War: Pieces to Add to the Puzzle, A Response to Andrew Mein

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Andrew Mein's contribution makes us enter a fascinating time period, and gives us access to important primary material. As Mein points out, it is rare (at least for the twentieth century) to see biblical scholars make their political allegiances explicit, and the literature discussed allows glimpses of what Mein describes as the influence of the war experience and the themes of Allied propaganda. What happens with British biblical scholarship in the First World War is a case of, as the conclusion points out, scholars deploying "their professional expertise to mobilise the Bible for war." To put it differently (and more simplistically), one explicitly sees the political agenda controlling the use of the Bible, and for people who, as Mein points out, had been defending the need of interpreting the biblical texts in their ancient contexts, rather than using them to address present-day concerns. Mein's contribution highlights how the defence of the war, the need to present Germany as evil, and to respond to a propaganda of hate led British scholars to describe the war as a holy war, to demonstrate that it was legitimate to kill Germans despite the words of the Sermon on the Mount, and to oppose the tyranny of Germany by likening it to the arrogance of Assyria.

The example of George Adam Smith is particularly clear, as Mein shows how the exegete changes his mind about Isaiah. This example is intriguing, since, as Mein also points out, scholars at the time were for the most part committed to a historical and critical approach to the

texts. Interpretations could thus evolve following the scientific method, but in the example used, Mein demonstrates that Smith's interpretation changes because of the experience of the war. This example illustrates how the so-called objectivity of the historical-critical method is an illusion, especially when scholars are unable to identify their own biases.

At the same time, Mein also aptly demonstrates that even British scholars committed to the war effort remain willing to be challenged, at least to some degree, by the biblical text. For John Edgar McFadyen, for example, prophetic literature allows to think of the war as judgment also on Britain and its sins. Mein indicates that biblical scholars did try to find a middle path, between "patriotic support" and "prophetic challenge," maintaining the necessity and holiness of the war, but also condemning its violence and hatred.

To add to Mein's presentation centred on British scholars, I turn to the attitude of a few French Protestant pastors during the First World War. Although my analysis concentrates on pastors more than on biblical scholars, the comparison contributes to bringing out the ways the Bible becomes a source of comfort and motivation, and also a weapon, throughout *la Grande Guerre*.

FRENCH PROTESTANT RESPONSES TO THE FIRST WORLD WAR

Focusing on the case of Protestant pastors underlines the importance of taking into account the situations in which British, German, and French scholars found themselves during the First World War. Despite the fact that Protestants are a very small minority in France at the time (only about 1.6% of the French population),¹ there is a strong anti-Protestant

¹ For the presentation of the situation of the Protestants in France at the eve of the First World War, see André Encrevé, "Introduction", *Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire du Protestantisme Français* 160/1 "Les protestants français et la Première Guerre mondiale," (2014): 11–31; see also Laurent Gambarotto, "L'opposition radicalisée de deux nations, régimes politiques et visions du monde (français et allemand) dans la prédication de

movement at the end of the nineteenth century in France. According to Charles Bailey, three elements complicate the position of Protestants in France when the war erupts: (1) the Protestant involvement in the Dreyfus affair (1894–1906); (2) their role in the separation between churches and state in 1905; as well as (3) their sympathy for pacifism.²

In the aftermath of the tensions surrounding the separation of state and church, and among polemical accusations dating back to the Prussian war, accusing the Protestants of not being fully French, or of being the natural allies of reformed Germany,³ the intellectual Protestant community mobilized strongly to affirm their patriotism and their French roots. One could have expected at least some solidarity with Germany, due to the admiration Protestant intellectuals had for its theologians but one notices that Protestant theologians were “fierce patriots, whose allegiance to their country was infinitely stronger than any loyalty towards European Protestantism.”⁴ For the preachers, the war is an opportunity to reinscribe the Protestants in the French community, and to display their investment in French identity.

A Guardian of Human Rights and Freedom

While both British and French scholars construct the war as just and holy, and demonise Germany, French pastors add another dimension to

guerre du protestantisme français”, in the same volume (35–55) and idem, *Foi et Patrie. La prédication du protestantisme français pendant la Première Guerre mondiale* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1996).

² See Charles E. Bailey, “L’attitude des théologiens protestants français envers l’Allemagne durant la guerre de 1914–1918,” *Bulletin de la Société de l’Histoire du Protestantisme Français* 133 (1987): 181–203.

³ For example, the *Comité catholique de propagande française à l’étranger* constructed the First World War as a religious war launched by Protestant Germany against Catholic France. Bailey, “L’attitude,” 184, n. 16, cites the book *La Guerre allemande et le catholicisme*, edited by the *Comité* and published in April 1915. Bailey also mentions the accusations of Frédéric Masson, for example, who also used that model of a war between Catholic France and Protestant Germany (198).

⁴ Bailey, “L’attitude,” 182 (my translation).

justify France's involvement in the war. As Laurent Gambarotto indicates, they present France as the guardian of human rights and freedom, and see this role of France as completely in agreement with Protestant values.⁵ Because these rights are, for Protestants, intimately related to the Reformation,⁶ Protestant preachers feel more responsible for their protection. In 1914, Wilfred Monod (1867–1943), a pastor at the parish of the Oratoire du Louvre in Paris, says:

Yes, we still keep in the blood this instinct for propaganda and for proselytism that have made us the people of the crusades and the people of human rights ... Heirs to Greco-Roman culture and to Christian universalism, we are the born champions of the human cause; other nations have their legitimate, necessary personality, and special qualities that we are missing; but our special mandate is indeed to spread here on earth these eternal principles of freedom, justice, brotherhood, that make up the immovable Decalogue of modern times.⁷

Note in passing how biblical thematics (spread on earth, the Decalogue) are secularised to match closely the ideals of the Revolution, and reinforce the unity between revolutionary ideals and Christian—more specifically Protestant—values. It also allows to sacralise the values of the French Revolution, and helps in justifying France's involvement in the war.

This is coupled with a demonisation of Germany, crucial for liberal Protestants because they had a great admiration for German theologians

⁵ See Gambarotto, "L'opposition radicalisée."

⁶ The French Protestants will insist on Calvin's role in establishing modern political rights. See Bailey, "L'attitude," 200.

⁷ Wilfred Monod, "Le Nom de l'Éternel, Paris" (August 23, 1914), quoted in Gambarotto, "L'opposition radicalisée," 39 (my translation). The original French reads: "Oui, nous gardons encore dans le sang cet instinct de propagande et de prosélytisme qui a fait de nous le peuple des Croisades et le peuple des Droits de l'homme ... Héritiers de la culture gréco-romaine et de l'universalisme chrétien, nous sommes les champions-nés de la cause humaine; d'autres nations ont leur personnalité légitime, nécessaire, et des qualités spéciales qui nous manquent; mais notre mandat particulier est bien de propager, ici-bas, ces éternels principes de liberté, de justice, de fraternité, qui forment l'intangibles Décalogue des temps modernes."

before the war.⁸ Germany's demonisation is built upon an intellectual evaluation of Germany, and culminates in an opposition of the German and French conceptions of politics, but also of civilization.⁹ Monod, for example, says that "in the frames of the same Europe, some nations embody the principles of feudal authoritarianism while others represent the ideal of free thought, of democracy, and of international peace."¹⁰ This opposition between Germany and France can be couched in biblical terms by Monod in a sermon before war is declared: "French democracy is surrounded by nations that have not had their Damascus road, that have not adopted the motto: Freedom, Equality, Fraternity."¹¹ For Monod, France symbolises an advanced state that others (Germany in particular) can access only if they accept a Damascus road experience—namely a fundamental conversion experience, orchestrated by God, that cures the blindness affecting them. It means, of course, that France has experienced such a divine experience and now dwells in superior realms. Biblical metaphors reinforce the superiority of France and contribute to constructing its place and its role in the war as divinely pre-ordained.

Gambarotto points out that with an enemy that is no longer simply a political or military adversary, but represents completely opposite ideals, it becomes easier to take the last step towards seeing the war as holy war, to equate the cause of France with the cause of God, and to describe the war as the battle between Good and Evil.¹² This could even

⁸ See Encrevé, "Introduction," 24.

⁹ See Gambarotto, "L'opposition radicalisée," 45.

¹⁰ Monod, "Nos légions invisibles" (September 6, 1914), as quoted in Gambarotto, "L'opposition radicalisée," 46 (my translation). The original French reads: "Dans les cadres d'une même Europe, certains peuples incarnent les principes de l'autoritarisme féodal, alors que d'autres représentent l'idéal de la pensée libre, de la démocratie et de la paix internationale."

¹¹ Monod, "La veillée d'armes" (August 2, 1914), as quoted in Gambarotto, "L'opposition radicalisée," 46 n. 50 (my translation). The original French reads: "La démocratie française est entourée de nations qui n'ont pas eu leur chemin de Damas, qui n'ont pas adopté la devise: Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité."

¹² See Gambarotto, "L'opposition radicalisée."

be presented as the battle between the good God of France and the evil God of Germany. Georges Boissonnas (1865–1942), a reformed pastor, writes as follows about the God worshipped by the Germans:

This God is not ours, we find it an abomination; yes, he horrifies us. This is why we do not want to fraternize with anyone who claims him as his ... We do not have this god; never has he been ours, and it is time to say it, to scream it before the world, for the honor of the true God and his Gospel. It is necessary to go even further and recognize that this denatured, falsified religion, which seeks to serve vainglory, the instinct of domination and other evil feelings, is worse than atheism.¹³

Consequently, the battle is not about preserving France, but about the future of Christianity.

Unmediated Use of the Bible

Both British and French scholars seem to make an unmediated use of the Bible. In the French sermons I have been able to read, the circumstances of the war have the effects of removing the historical distance separating the preachers from the text. As Mein also points out for British scholars, this is all the more surprising since some of the Protestant preachers, at least those of the liberal school, are heavily influenced by the historical-critical German school of exegesis. During the war, Protestants approach the Bible in an immediate manner, using the rhetoric found in the texts as directly relevant and applicable to their current situation. This is more apparent in their reading of the war and

¹³ Georges Boissonnas, "Où est ton Dieu?" (March 21, 1915), as quoted in Gambarotto, *Foi et Patrie*, 223–224 (my translation). The original French reads: "Ce Dieu n'est pas le nôtre, nous l'avons en abomination; oui il nous fait horreur. C'est pourquoi nous ne voulons fraterniser avec aucun de ceux qui se réclament de lui ... nous n'avons pas ce Dieu-là; jamais il n'a été le nôtre, et le temps est venu de le dire, de le crier à la face du monde, pour l'honneur du vrai Dieu et de son Évangile. Il faut aller plus loin encore et reconnaître que la religion dénaturée, falsifiée, pour servir aux fins de l'orgueil, de l'instinct de domination et d'autres mauvais sentiments, est pire que l'athéisme."

immediate post-war time as episodes in an apocalyptic scenario which God controls, and in which France has a decisive role to play. In comparison with British uses, it is interesting to see that some French preachers make use of apocalyptic rather than prophetic literature. This is clear in Wilfred Monod's sermons at the end of the war, where he compares the idea of a *Société des nations* that emerges in 1917 to a messianic entity.¹⁴ Here are two longer quotes that translate this fever, even once the rhetorical flourish characteristic of Monod is removed:

The *Société des nations*, what is it, ultimately, if not the hidden name of humanity, the "new name" that was promised to it from all eternity, its baptism name? It is for the *Société des nations* that Christ bled on Calvary, it is to the *Société des nations* that he opened his arms on the cross, it is towards the *Société des nations* that the Holy Spirit drives us, painstakingly and with certainty, "with sighs too deep for words," so that the entire planet will be inhabited by "one flock, under one shepherd."¹⁵

Three biblical references pepper Monod's discourse here (Rev 3:12; Rom 8:26; and John 10:16, in that order) and help to describe the *Société des nations* with messianic accents, as an actor taking over attributes of God, the Spirit, and Jesus.

A couple of years later, in 1920, recalling the announcement of the armistice on November 11, 1918, Monod describes the emotion he felt. His language becomes even more lyrical and constructs the *Société* as a christophanic event.¹⁶ The quote is a model of apocalyptic language:

¹⁴ See Gambarotto, *Foi et Patrie*, 187.

¹⁵ Wilfred Monod, "Les Fanatiques de la Force et les Esclaves de la Faiblesse" (October 7, 1917), as quoted in Gambarotto, *Foi et Patrie*, 294 (my translation). The original French reads: "La Société des Nations, qu'est-ce en définitive, si ce n'est le nom caché de l'humanité, le 'nom nouveau' qui lui fut promis de toute éternité, son nom de baptême? C'est pour la Société des Nations que le Christ a saigné au Calvaire, c'est à la Société des Nations qu'il a ouvert ses bras sur la croix, c'est vers la Société des Nations que l'Esprit saint nous entraîne, laborieusement et sûrement, 'avec des soupirs inexprimables,' afin que la planète entière soit habitée par 'un seul troupeau sous un seul Berger.'"

¹⁶ See Gambarotto, *Foi et Patrie*, 294.

Ah! Under the chimes of the armistice, we cried for joy. Satan was falling from the sky like lightning, and in the manger in Bethlehem, the Son of man was born again, surrounded by a halo of tenderness and faith, in the shape of a *Société des nations*. In the European sky, the choir of angels was chanting a hymn to disarmament ... Today even, in the apparent dusk of civilization, we learn to discern the colossal granite cliffs which are already emerging from the shadows and which will be the infrastructure of the future. Yes, the sketch of an international charter of Work, and the lineaments of a *Société des nations* transpire through the peace treatise like the still veiled but already dazzling face of Justice, like the smiling and yet profound face of Love, like the holy Face of the Son of Man.¹⁷

For Monod, the armistice and the creation of the *Société des nations* clearly mark the beginning of a new aeon.

Pacifism

One topic leads scholars to approach the Bible more critically, and seek proof texts for their position. It concerns the question of pacifism, something that British scholars also address.

Protestant preachers realize unanimously that some sections of the Bible (notably the Sermon on the Mount, and the commandment to love one's enemy) put them in a difficult position when they are asked to justify their involvement in the war. Faced with this problem, preach-

¹⁷ Wilfred Monod, "Ensuite viendra la fin" (January 11, 1920), as quoted in Gambarotto, *Foi et Patrie*, 295 n. 256 (my translation). The original French reads: "Ah! sous les carillons de l'armistice, nous pleurons de joie. Satan tombait du ciel comme l'éclair, et dans la crèche de Bethléem naissait à nouveau le Fils de l'homme, aurolé de tendresse et de foi, sous la forme de la Société des Nations. Au ciel européen, le chœur des anges entonnait un hymne au désarmement ... Aujourd'hui même, et dans le crépuscule apparent de la civilisation, nous apprenons à discerner les colossales falaises de granit qui déjà, émergent de l'ombre, et qui serviront d'infrastructure à l'avenir. Oui, l'ébauche d'une charte internationale du Travail, et les linéaments d'une Société des Nations, transparaissent à travers le Traité de paix comme le visage encore voilé, mais éblouissant, de la Justice, comme la figure à la fois souriante et grave de l'Amour, comme la sainte Face du Fils de l'homme."

ers are eager to oppose pacifism and to explain why France is justified in getting involved in the war and why soldiers should not feel guilty about killing the enemy. One key argument in justifying the war effort is to insist on what is at stake in the war: this is about freedom, human rights, and a higher understanding of Christianity. To get involved in the war means standing on the sides of these values and protecting them. Thus, it is justified to make war, since ultimately, the aim of the war is to maintain peace and put an end to all wars. By making the war a holy war, pastors also feel it is legitimate to ask God for victory, for example.¹⁸ God cannot remain neutral.

The question of “loving one’s enemy” is not taken lightly by Protestant preachers; they do see that they are faced with an almost impossible task when they try to maintain together the reality of the war and the seriousness of the commandment.¹⁹ In fact, the commandment is relativized by some preachers who argue that it cannot be meant for war situations. When it comes to dealing with the enemy, compassion is (temporarily) discouraged.²⁰ Jean Lafon (1856–1943), pastor in Uzès and Montauban, indicates that “the precepts of the Gospel do not apply to combat itself.”²¹ Wilfred Monod, however, argues that this relativizing of the power of Scriptures by preachers is problematic. He insists to say that the words in Jesus in Luke 23:34 (“Then Jesus said, ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing’”) need to be heard by soldiers, even if it is difficult. Yet, Monod does not really argue for forgiveness and love.²² He says emotionally:

¹⁸ See Gambarotto, *Foi et Patrie*, 236.

¹⁹ See, for example, Henri Gambier, “Une offre de Jésus-Christ” (February 11, 1917), as quoted in Gambarotto, *Foi et Patrie*, 271 (my translation). The original French reads: “Le commandement de l’Évangile qui se heurte à une foule d’oppositions.”

²⁰ See Gambarotto, *Foi et Patrie*, 272.

²¹ Jean Lafon, “La tentation des repréailles” (February 21, 1915), as quoted in Gambarotto, *Foi et Patrie*, 272 (my translation). The original French reads: “Les préceptes de l’Évangile ne s’appliquent pas au combat lui-même.”

²² Gambarotto, *Foi et Patrie*, 273.

Oh! My brothers, do not insist. I know these atrocities; I am close to tears and my voice trembles with indignation ... But I would be unfaithful to my mandate if I lowered the evangelical ideal, if I let you move your eyes away from the Crucified. Contemplate him! Here is my preaching. I don't dare express precise advice ... God keeps me from outraging, in you, the natural feeling of justice! I will simply ceaselessly repeat: contemplate the Son of man on the cross.²³

Monod, and others around him, know what is demanded by the Gospel and do not mean to diminish that requirement, but they are conscious of how difficult it is to embody the love command at the time. Yet, they continue asking the soldiers to take the higher road and use examples from Scriptures, and the character of Jesus, to support this higher ideal.²⁴ Here it seems that the Bible is engaged with more critical distance, forced by the specific situation of the preachers, who must bring together differing ideals (patriotism, support for the war and respect for the Scriptures).

One last work is worth mentioning, which takes a different perspective on the war, and the question of pacifism. André Chamson's 1925 novel, *Roux le bandit*, is about "a radical pacifist"²⁵ who refuses to be drafted for the First World War. This work of fiction is based on some historical elements, notably the figure of Alfred Roux (1894–1985) who hid from 1914–1917 in a valley of the Cévennes mountains.²⁶ As Ca-

²³ Wilfred Monod, "En face du crucifié" (October 11, 1914), as quoted in Gambarotto, *Foi et Patrie*, 273 (my translation). The original French reads: "Oh! Mes frères, n'insistez pas. Je connais ces atrocités; j'en ai les larmes aux yeux et ma voix en tremble d'indignation. ... Mais je serais infidèle à mon mandat si je rabaisais l'idéal évangélique, si je consentais à détourner vos regards du Crucifié. Contemplez-le! Voilà toute ma prédication. Je ne m'enhardis pas jusqu'à formuler des conseils précis ... Dieu me préserve de scandaliser, en vous, le sentiment inné de la justice! Je me borne donc à répéter inlassablement: contemplez le Fils de l'homme en croix."

²⁴ See Gambarotto, *Foi et Patrie*, 275.

²⁵ Patrick Cabanel, "André Chamson: 'Roux le bandit,' la paix et la guerre," in *Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire du Protestantisme Français* 160/1 "Les protestants français et la Première Guerre mondiale" (2014): 507–521 (507): "un pacifiste intégral."

²⁶ See Cabanel, "André Chamson," 510–512 in particular.

banel indicate, Roux was not admired by his peers, and he is not representative of the Protestant world of the Cévennes, who displayed obedience to the republican state. Cabanel indicates that Chamson knew of one real Christian pacifist: the Methodist pastor Bertin Aguillon. He was born in 1885, and was a pastor in Anduze and Sauve. At the beginning of August 1914, he goes to war as a nurse and stretcher bearer, in order to not carry a weapon. He is killed on September 20, a Sunday, as he was preparing to lead worship. It is possible that the reputation of Aguillon was known by Chamson, who then attributes it to Roux. The novel presents Roux as completely loyal to God's commandment "thou shall not kill," and as a prophetic figure.

In *Roux le bandit*, one finds the same immediate use of the Bible evidenced in the apocalyptic interpretation of the conflict by other preachers. Yet, the intention of the author is different, and thus the literature chosen is different as well: apocalyptic literature on the one side, prophetic genre on the other. At the same time, both genres insist on God's control over history, as well as on the importance of remaining faithful to God. And both propose a language ripe with biblical imagery and language, in which, if one cannot exactly identify what passages are explicitly quoted, one feels that this is "Bible talk," "patois de Canaan." Cabanel provides one example of this type of language, an excerpt that reports Roux's style of speech:

He spoke to me for an hour, better than a pastor; the good Lord seemed to be screaming on his mouth and all that he said on its own resembled passages of Scriptures. He repeated several times: "The Eternal has just abandoned the world, and the world is crazy. You are right to act as you do, and in the madness of the world, your submission is wisdom. Yet, we must not leave the ear of the Eternal, and we must not neglect His word, and it is to follow His teaching and to keep His law that I refused to go to war. A handful of wheat sowed on the earth, on top of the mountains, the fruit that it will produce will make noise like Lebanon, and man will blossom in the towns, like grass from the earth."²⁷

²⁷ *Roux le bandit*, as quoted in Cabanel, "André Chamson," 512 (my translation). The original French reads: "Il m'a parlé pendant une heure mieux qu'un pasteur; le Bon

Roux becomes a mouthpiece for God, and elaborates on the will of God. For him, it precludes going to war. However, twenty years later, Chamson will explain that a just cause allows for war. Here too we find the logic that animated the preachers during the First World War: if the cause can be demonstrated as just, then it is legitimate to break the commandment against killing and to make war. For Roux, the cause motivating the First World War was not grave enough.

The Bible is not the decisive factor when it comes to war, but rather the situation in which each person is involved. It is used as a tool to strengthen one's own convictions in most of the French Protestant preaching in the First World War.

Dieu semblait crier sur sa bouche et tout ce qu'il disait de lui-même ressemblait à des passages de l'Écriture. Il m'a répété plusieurs fois: l'Éternel vient d'abandonner le monde, et le monde est fou. Vous faites bien d'agir comme vous le faites et dans la folie du monde, votre soumission est de la sagesse. Mais il ne faut pas que nous quittions l'oreille de l'Éternel et que nous méprisions sa parole, et c'est pour suivre son enseignement et pour garder sa loi que j'ai refusé de faire la guerre. Une poignée de froment étant semée dans la terre, au sommet des montagnes, le fruit qu'elle produira fera du bruit comme le Liban, et les hommes fleuriront dans les villes, comme l'herbe de la terre."