

BOISI CENTER

INTERVIEWS



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JONATHAN EBEL is an assistant professor of religion at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and a former lieutenant commander in the U.S. Navy and Navy Reserve. He spoke with Boisi Center associate director **Erik Owens** and undergraduate research assistant **Claire Kairys** before participating in a panel on the religious component of the U.S. military experience.

OWENS: Your book, *Faith in the Fight*, looks at the religious experience of American soldiers in the First World War. What did you determine through your primary research?

EBEL: I found out two main things. First of all, not surprisingly, soldiers are complicated spiritual beings. They are complicated in ways that defy denominational or traditional boundaries. Through this complication, one can sort out particular themes. In the particular historical era [of World War I]—which has carried forward into the present moment—many believed that there is something noble, authorizing, and validating about the experience of combat. However, this experience is also disempowering and existentially disorienting.

One thing that I did in the book was to associate God-talk not only with theology, but also with the ways that people understand how the world works around them, whether that is by chance, luck or faith. I am trying to see what the theological balance is and to examine the many ways of talking about being powerless in the face of this industrial combat.

OWENS: In *Faith in the Fight*, you talk about the religious awakening that occurred after the Great War. Was that a unique outcome, or is that a traditional consequence (in the sense that both

soldiers and the nation partake in this religious narrative)?

EBEL: What I tried to argue in the book was that this religious awakening was not denominationally based, but was what I refer to as a “re-illusionment” among



the soldiery. Those who are coming back from the war are doubly invested in the mythologies they developed, a kind of millennial efficacy of violence through which America can be made whole.

Other people have written about religious awakenings in the wake of World War II, particularly the birth of national televangelism and Billy Graham revivals. I think this phenomenon is also evident in the

post-Vietnam era, which experienced a re-awakening of politically engaged conservative evangelicalism (although I would be wary about tying that particular one to soldiers). I think there are other social things that are happening, as indeed there were in World War I, which can account for the rise of the moral majority in the Christian coalition.

That said, the 1920s—a time of the modernist, fundamentalist controversy—is a really fascinating period for a historian of religion.

OWENS: The Great War was particularly gruesome for Americans. Did it make soldiers more or less likely to find spiritual dimensions in their experience?

EBEL: Soldiers seemed to have entered the war with a particular understanding of what it was going to be like. They expected it to be characterized by weapons of intimacy, or hand-to-hand combat, but instead they encountered weapons of industry that were a lot more indiscriminate and killed in many different ways. Those were not entirely new, but the scale at which they were encountered in World War I was really jarring. The mythology of war to that point in America (and, to some extent, to this day as well) featured a man with a rifle up on a horse. The Civil War, the Indian Wars and the Revolutionary War all featured prominently

in the psychological experience of the American soldier in the First World War.

One thing that I argue in the book is that we move too quickly to narratives of disillusionment in America with regard to World War I. I think that the British and French experiences have exerted an overly strong influence on American interpretations of World War I, such that we regard the “lost generation” and the rhetoric of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Ezra Pound and E.E. Cummings as though such experiences the norm. They are not invalid, but they do not describe what I would argue was the experience of the overwhelming majority: a doubling down on violence and the view of war as a necessary means of keeping America safe and whole.

OWENS: You write about how the metaphysics of good and evil are enmeshed in the theological dimension of soldiers’ experience in war. How has that manifested itself in the last hundred years? Do all soldiers in war see themselves as agents of good in the world, or is this an American phenomenon?

EBEL: That’s a great question. There certainly is an American habit of mind in warfare: that we are the bastion of good and are struggling for good in the world. While it describes America, I cannot say that it is American specifically both because of propaganda and its existence in other cultures and nations of the world. But from World War I to World War II, in Korea and to some extent in Vietnam and throughout the Cold War, that habit of mind does function powerfully if not universally within the American context of war.

At the same time, to the extent that we do that, we lose track of some really troubling war realities that America has gotten involved with. For instance, aligning with Stalin in World War II and deliberately targeting civilians in Europe and Japan with napalm and incendiary weapons (which was well-documented and confessed by Robert McNamara).

Those sorts of things get pushed out of the narrative because they trouble it.

OWENS: But aren’t those flaws in the narrative validated precisely by the belief in the purity of our mission?

EBEL: I think that that is certainly part of it, but that does not mean that there is not something important about going back and trying to recover those more morally complex realities in their focus.

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From what I have heard and from the little that I have studied about Robert McNamara, I do not think that he was possessed by a sense of evil. He was a bureaucrat who was doing a job, looking at numbers and putting weapons in places. Some of my research, which is in a very embryonic stage, offers a religious history of American weaponry. I am asking questions like how it is that a weapon—such as napalm—gets developed, and how do people think about it? Do they consider bodies? Do they consider pain? From what I have read from scientists at Harvard who developed napalm, they

only considered the best way to burn things down. And so the body just sort of vanishes.

OWENS: The mention of McNamara raises the question of who is responsible for the narratives of spirituality and religion that you’re talking about. Certainly, they’re driven by efficiency: when you’re in charge of the military, you need to get the job done. But what are the roles of soldiers, chaplains, politicians and civilians in the development of this narrative over time?

EBEL: Well, let me first say a little bit more about the development of this narrative. One can look at American pulpits in 1917, 1919 and from the 1920s through the 1930s to hear ministers—liberal and conservative Protestants, liberal and conservative Catholics and Jews—talking about the nobility of war for God and for country. That narrative is also present in newspapers, in editorials, in Hollywood and in novels. I think it’s just part of the warp and woof of American culture in that period, which then becomes built into environments. Memorial Church [at Harvard University], Soldiers Field [in Chicago] and the amazingly beautiful cemeteries in Europe from World War I and later from World War II really sanctify the soldier and make him perhaps more religious in death than he might have been in life.

Resistors to that narrative come from different corners, including traditional peace churches, pacifist social movements like the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the student anti-war movement in Vietnam, and sometimes from within the military itself. As a famous example, John Kerry is such a lightning rod for taking the narrative of authorization through exposure to violence and turning the myth back in on itself. There are people from other quarters—from the pulpit, American film, media, television and novels—who write those kinds of narratives, as well.

While I would say that we are all complicated in the narrative's production, we are all also equally empowered in its deconstruction, although there are definitely some dangerous ways to deconstruct it. This is where John Kerry might be an interesting example; he became an appealing figure to the anti-war movement because of the fact that he'd been to war.

OWENS: Can you say a bit about Pat Tillman and how he and his family bring this narrative to present day in an interesting way?

EBEL: Yes. I'd like to start by acknowledging just the immense tragedy at a personal level for his wife, brothers and parents, who have really taken an enormous emotional risk by stepping out and being the public face of his service and death. Pat Tillman was famously the last person to receive a football scholarship at Arizona State University. He rose through the ranks, an undersized, scrappy athlete in the Pac 10, to be drafted by the Arizona Cardinals in the seventh round. He became a very successful, aggressive and exceptionally violent football player in the NFL, and after two or three years on a rookie contract he signed a \$1.2 million annual contract to continue playing for the Arizona Cardinals.

But after September 11, Tillman, like a lot of people, felt that he wanted to do something more for the country. He had always been sort of detached from the game of football as the meaning-making organ in his life, so he decided that he wanted to go and do something. He convinced his brother Kevin to enlist in the military and they became Army Rangers. They deployed to Iraq and then to Afghanistan, and on April 22, 2004, Pat was killed in Afghanistan.

His death was described immediately in very standard heroic terms, which we shouldn't be surprised about. Based on that narrative, he was embraced by people on the political right as a real hero. John Kerry is a part of the story because he was a candidate for president at the same

time, and there were people who were contrasting Pat Tillman—portrayed as a truly sacrificial, truly heroic soldier—with John Kerry, portrayed as some sort of bastardized pro-Communist, pro-liberal pseudo-veteran.

In any case, it came out soon afterward that his death wasn't as it had been described, and also that his politics were not as they had been described: Tillman was anti-Bush, against the Iraq war and an avid reader of Noam Chomsky.

Now at this point, the political left rushed in, wanting that part of Pat Tillman. This is where it becomes important for us to think about the way in which the violence was done to *him*; apart from his family, no one wanted to embrace the real Pat Tillman. His biographer, Jon Krakauer, I think, is just as guilty as anybody and was not as comfortable with the violent Pat Tillman as he really could be. For instance, in his book, when he has to

account for Tillman beating a fellow teenager severely and facing charges of felony assault, Krakauer turns briefly to neurology, not exactly his field, citing an underdeveloped "dorsal lateral prefrontal cortex." This seems like a rather elaborate way around a part of Tillman's life and career, violence, that Krakauer would prefer to see as incidental rather than essential.

OWENS: I hope that maybe today in the panel we'll talk a bit about the religious overlay on that as well, particularly the use and abuse of Tillman among the Christian right, the religious left and the non-religious left.

EBEL: I'm treating this as a kind of *de facto* religious process, but there are more specific religious dimensions to it that you just mentioned.

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