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## The neglected story of non-combatants at war. Modern British fiction on World War One

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### RESUMEN:

La literatura tiene un poder especial para revelar la compleja historia de la guerra. Trata de soldados rasos y oficiales, en lugar de los civiles, objetores de conciencia, sacerdotes o capellanes, que suelen ser el foco de atención en los estudios históricos y de ficción. En este artículo, ofreceremos una visión panorámica desde la perspectiva de sacerdotes y capellanes del ejército, ya que ofrecen una oportunidad única para explorar los aspectos éticos y emocionales de la guerra. Con la participación del lector, navegaremos a través de una serie de decisiones morales, ante las cuales es imposible permanecer neutral.

**Palabras clave:** Primera Guerra Mundial, sacerdotes, capellanes, moral, ética

### ABSTRACT:

Literature has a special power to reveal the complex story of war. It is private soldiers and officers rather than non-combatants, civilians, conscientious objectors, clergymen and chaplains who are usually the focus of attention in historical studies and fiction. In my article, I focus on the situation of clergymen and army chaplains as they offer a unique opportunity to explore the ethical and emotional aspects of war, involving the reader in a series of moral choices to which it is impossible to remain neutral.

**Keywords:** World War One, clergymen, chaplains, morale, ethics

To tell the complex story of clergymen and chaplains, seven novels and one short story have been selected: Mackenzie Ford's *Gifts of War* (2008), Chris Ryan's *One Good Turn* (2008) Anne Perry's quintet (2003–2007) and her short story *Heroes* (2007). In Ford's novel, the minister is anonymous and a minor character serving on the home front. In *One Good Turn*, he is similarly anonymous and in a minor role; in his capacity as a chaplain on the western front, however, he plays a key part in the resolution of the central event of the novel, the clearing of the name of Private Chris Ransom. Anne Perry's Joseph Reavley is also a chaplain at the front; however, in contrast to Ryan's novel, he is the protagonist of *Heroes* and one of the chief characters in Perry's quintet. Only in the quintet is the role of the minister both at home (in the person of Hallam Kerr) and on the front portrayed, and only here can the reader trace the development of the chaplain through four gruelling years at the front.

Mackenzie Ford's minister is the only clergyman discussed here who is totally untouched by war. He is a stereotypical figure, whose rigid ideas about right and wrong are unable to accommodate the complexities and special circumstances of war. Anne Perry's Hallam Kerr, the vicar of Selborne St Giles, in Cambridgeshire, is also divorced from war, but he gradually learns from Joseph Reavley's experiences at the front, modifying his ideas and practices to accommodate a world that he does not understand. Christopher Ryan's chaplain is at the front but far removed from the action. He has fixed ideas of right and wrong, and a naive belief in the justice and judgement of the British Army.

As the protagonist of *Heroes*, Reavley is responsible for the spiritual welfare of his men; as the chaplain of the quintet, he cares for souls. The

difference between the two is important for understanding the change in identity that takes place in Reavley. While *Heroes* provides some insights into Reavley's role at the front, its chief interest for the present discussion is as a point of comparison between Perry's earlier and later representations of the chaplain. As Reavley's faith is challenged by his men, commanding officers, friends, family and, not least, his own conscience, and as he observes the brutalities of combat, the reader witnesses a series of crises involving complex moral and spiritual choices that bring to the fore the nature and consequences of war for the individual. Since chaplains enlisted as non-combatants, they were given a bad press, not only because people were unsure about their motives (Holmes, 2005: 503) but also because their role in war was diffuse (Snape, 2005: 83). The negative picture of the chaplain at war was established very early on by such well-known figures as the soldier-poet and memoirist Robert Graves. Graves's *Good-bye to All That* contains the following passage:

For the regimental chaplains as a body we had no respect. If the regimental chaplains had shown one tenth the courage, endurance, and other human qualities that the regimental doctors showed, we agreed, the British Expeditionary Force might well have started a religious revival. (1973: 158)

Historians have also tended to assume that an obsolescence of religion was an important force in early twentieth-century British culture and society, causing chaplains to be treated as peripheral figures with poorly defined roles (Snape, 2005: 246). Anne Perry's novels and her short story are an effective corrective to this view.

## 1. THE ROLE OF THE CLERGY IN WORLD WAR ONE

At the beginning of the war, the number of army chaplains at the front totalled just 120 (Holmes, 2005: 509). By 1918, there were more than 3,000 (Rider, 2001: 7–12). Anglicans were the most numerous: in August 1914, they accounted for almost half of the chaplains; by August 1918, they comprised more than fifty percent – 1,941 out of a total of 3,416.

The duties of ministers and chaplains were multifarious, although not all were obligatory (Rider, 2001: 10). On the home front, they conducted services, visited their parishioners and performed all the normal mandatory tasks of a minister in peacetime. In addition, during war they were required to comfort the bereaved and the wounded at home on convalescence. Chaplains at the front took church services and official church parades where appropriate, as well as burial services or committals. They identified corpses by collecting tags and papers on dead bodies and, where possible, kept a record of the identities and burial places in order to inform the dead men's families. Anglican chaplains were permitted to go into forward positions only when summoned to bury the dead. There were few guidelines for their work at the front other than those specified in King's Regulations, which focused on parade and voluntary services and performing burials. During battle, chaplains also sometimes collected messages from the wounded to their families, assisted medical staff and organised mild recreations. On occasion, they even censored letters.

## 2. THE HOME FRONT

In the novels discussed here, the two ministers serving on the home front (the anonymous minister of *Gifts of War* and the more dynamic Hallam Kerr in Perry's quintet) are stereotypical figures from pre-war England. Ford's minister makes only two brief appearances in the novel, but they are significant. He appears first at the beginning of the novel. The churchyard setting in which he is portrayed is idyllic: from it there can be seen a stream, a kissing gate and a cricket field, symbols of an uncontaminated land. As Hal, the protagonist and narrator comments, "Here it was difficult to believe that we were at war, so peaceful and pastoral was the panorama, so far from Flanders in every way" (Ford, 2008: 42). The alliteration describing the panorama and the superlative "every" accentuates the serenity of the scene. It is the minister who breaks the peace, "scurrying like a large moorhen" out of the church porch (Ford, 2008: 42). His black cassock separates him from others, and his "scurrying" manner seems unworthy of a man of the cloth – so much so that Hal reflects that he might be the subject of mockery and gossip, as is his own minister in Edgewater, London. The minister is not interested in Hal, despite the fact that he is dressed in uniform (his wound has made him unfit for active service). His attention is instead focused on a woman who is tidying graves. In contrast, Hal notices the "appreciative glances" of passers-by, who assume that he has been wounded at the front. Their interest contrasts sharply with the minister's apparent indifference.

The second mention of the vicar underlines his stereotypical identity: his views are inflexible and

his attitude damning. He condemns Samantha, the girlfriend of a German soldier whom Hal met at the front, because she has given birth to a child out of wedlock. He has led the opposition to Samantha, "even going so far [...] as to preach 'fornication' from the pulpit" (Ford, 2008: 86). This is one of the main reasons why she does not go to church. Ford's minister is described as one who excludes and judges; he is preoccupied with religion rather than Christian love, divorced from the concerns and sufferings of the war, and has little understanding of those in need of support. He also has no identity; this is not only because he is anonymous and mentioned only twice in the novel but because he has no past or future, and he does not interact with or learn from other characters. He disappears as suddenly as he enters the story. His significance for the progression of the narrative rests in the implicit part that he plays in Samantha's decision to go to London with Hal. Unlike Hallam Kerr of Anne Perry's quintet, Ford's minister does not ponder questions of right and wrong, duty and irresponsibility, faith and confusion because his mind is already made up. Nor is there room for debate within the narrative or between the reader and the text because the minister's story is a simple one, virtually untouched by the complexity of war.

Hallam Kerr's parish, like that of Ford's minister, is situated in an idyllic part of England: Selbourne St Giles in Cambridgeshire. And, like Ford's minister, Kerr is far removed from the horrors of the front. However, unlike him, Kerr makes regular appearances, albeit in only one of Perry's novels, *Angels in the Gloom* (2006). The third in the series, the novel bears witness to Kerr's development emotionally as well as spiritually. Through Joseph Reavley, he begins to understand the suffering caused by war and how this must change his perception of his role at home as comforter and spiritual guide. Kerr and Reavley represent the clergyman's two different roles, domestic and military, during war. As their relationship develops, the reader gains insight into the special challenges that war presents to military chaplains and civilian ministers alike. A comparison of Kerr and Joseph Reavley also reveals the close relationship between memory and identity. In Kerr's case, he has no memory of the war to enable him to cope with bereavement and convalescing soldiers. Reavley, on the other hand, is forced to relive his memories of the front, particularly during his convalescence in St Giles. They enable him not only to help bereaved citizens but also to guide Kerr in his parish duties. Both Kerr and Reavley gradually learn what it means to be a minister in time of crisis, as memories and stories of war cause them to question their ideas and values. Both become stronger as a consequence. For Kerr, the process takes approximately one year (between *Angels of Gloom* and *At Some Disputed Barricade*). For Reavley, it takes four years, beginning at the end of the first novel and reaching its climax in the final chapter of *We Shall Not Sleep*.

When we first encounter Kerr, he has a romantic picture of the war, in which patriotism and heroism are the chief ingredients. When Reavley returns from the front after being wounded, Kerr focuses on the chaplain's Military Cross and the honour that it brings to the village. He sees no conflict between the role of the minister as God's servant and that of a captain in the British Army. Kerr appears to identify directly with the war effort as

he asks Reavley, "We men of God are fighters too, what?" (Perry, 2006: 36). However, he understands neither Reavley's role at the front nor what his award denotes in terms of self-sacrifice. Reavley is depressed because he realises that, while he and Kerr have taken the same vows, and even live in the same village, their worlds could not be more different.

While Kerr excuses himself from being at the front on the grounds of age and poor health, Reavley's frustration is increased because he knows that there are other, equally valuable services that Kerr could perform, including visiting soldiers in hospital. In real life, there were, for example, a number of church-run clubs that provided an opportunity to serve local communities and soldiers at the front. These, like the Young Men's Christian Association (Snape, 2005: 205–240), organised entertainments as well as providing comfort. Reavley wonders how he can explain to Kerr that what a soldier needs above all is understanding, compassion and a chance to forget. He experiences increasing frustration as he tries to explain what conditions are like at the front. At the same time, he is angry with himself for causing Kerr pain and struggles to understand his fellow minister's situation as he reflects on the consequences of conscription for local families. Kerr's final comment in their initial conversation, phrased as a question, demonstrates that his perception of the war remains unchanged at this point. The manner in which the question is phrased is formal and stiff: "I'm sure you need all the rest you can get, grow strong again and go back into the fray, what?" (Perry, 2006: 38). The reality of war that is locked in Reavley's memories precludes an adequate response and ensures that there will always be a gulf between him and Kerr.

There is, however, hope for Kerr, because he can learn. By the end of *At Some Disputed Barricade*, he is described as "a man who was usually adequate, and sometimes superb but, good or bad, he no longer ran away or hid in meaningless ritual answers" (Perry, 2007a: 126). No details are provided but it is clear that it is Reavley who is responsible for this transformation. Back at the front, he only needs to affirm his friendship to Kerr; advice is no longer needed. By 1917, Kerr has found the courage to face the reality of war because he knows who he is and what his mission is. Unlike the minister in *Gifts of War*, he becomes part of the war effort because he allows himself and his prejudices to be challenged and modified.

### 3. THE CHAPLAIN ON THE WESTERN FRONT

While Reavley undergoes a similar process, it is infinitely more dramatic and far-reaching. At the beginning of the war, he quickly learns that one of his primary purposes at the front is to maintain morale among the soldiers. This duty could be interpreted in many different ways. In real life, the motivation and sustenance of the fighting spirit of the British Army was a key issue, particularly from 1916 onwards, when conscription was introduced. There had also been a number of failed British offensives at Neuve Chapelle, Aubers ridge, Festubert and Loos in 1915, and at the Somme in 1916.

Military morale comprises the willingness of units and individual soldiers to endure the hazards and discomforts of war and is fostered by belief in a cause, good training, confidence in one's leaders, the existence of adequate supply and support

services, loyalty to one's immediate comrades and victory in battle (Snape, 2005: 91; Sheffield, 2000: 180–181; Baynes, 1987: 97–100). In World War One it was dependent on remuneration and reward as well as discipline; more importantly, however, it relied on the moral and social ties that bind an army together (Westbrook, 1981: 244–278). While attempts were made to stimulate morale by the provision of adequate leave and an efficient postal service, rear area canteens and entertainments, "chaplains were expected to play a direct and sustained role in motivating soldiers to fight" (Snape, 2005: 94).

The novels discussed here show how widely chaplains in real life interpreted their duty of maintaining morale. That this became an increasingly difficult task is indicated in the rising number of courts martial during the war: on average, there were 160 courts martial a day during the latter part of the war; in 1913, the figure was "only" 10 a day (Beckett and Simpson, 1986: 23; Ferguson, 1998: 346). The minister in Christopher Ryan's *One Good Turn*, who appears briefly at the end of the story, has only a vague understanding of morale and shows little interest in the topic, as demonstrated in a lunchtime discussion where the main topic of conversation is the apparent declining morale of British soldiers. The guests make trite remarks about the discomfort of being "up to your neck in mud twelve hours a day" (Ryan, 2008: 76) or the need to ensure that soldiers do not "slack off [...] when the Hun is at his most deadly" (Ryan, 2008: 77). It is only when the minister sees a chance to mention his recent interview with Private Christopher Ransom, accused of desertion and cowardice and facing a court martial, that he enters the conversation. As he describes Ransom's case, he reveals his simple view of the motives of soldiers and their responses to the horrors of the battlefield. He goes so far as to accuse Ransom of "pure evil" (Ryan, 2008: 77), suggesting that he had deliberately wounded himself to avoid combat and then attempted to escape by stealing the identity papers of another soldier. At this point in the narrative, the minister accepts the army's version of the truth without question and condemns Ransom before even talking to him. It is only the contribution to the discussion by a captain and the mention of his earlier chance conversation with Captain Bertram Stokes (whose life Ransom had saved at great risk to his own) that prompts the minister to reconsider Ransom's conduct.

The strenuous efforts made by the minister to trace Captain Stokes and to check the veracity of his story reveal that he is no longer willing to accept unconditionally the British Army's version. When he discovers that Ransom is innocent, he tries to ensure that justice is done, not realising that he is already too late. The narrator reminds the reader in the postscript that, through his narrative, not only is the record set straight by revealing the true facts of the case but Ransom's bravery, like that of so many soldiers in real life, must be remembered because it is part of the identity of those whose stories have not yet been told. The minister learns a valuable lesson about the honour and self-sacrifice of soldiers and the importance of believing the best rather than the worst about human beings.

The minister's role in maintaining morale was a complex one and heavily dependent on trust, as both Captain Holt in *Heroes* (Perry, 2007b: 42)

and Joseph Reavley *At Some Disputed Barricade* (Perry, 2007a: 256) demonstrate. It was also about keeping up the men's spirits: Reavley "knew how desperate men felt when they risked their lives to save another man and he died. A kind of despair set in" (Perry, 2007b: 13). He blames himself for not always seeing how guilt and failure to save another soldier's life can bring a man close to breaking point (Perry, 2007b: 24). By the end of *Heroes*, when he discovers that Captain Holt is a murderer and a coward and not the hero that his men believe him to be (Holt panicked in battle and killed the man who witnessed his disgrace in order to cover his own shame), Reavley gives Holt the chance to lead a suicidal raid rather than be exposed as a coward and liar. In this way, Holt is offered the opportunity to earn the heroic reputation he does not deserve but in that his men so desperately need to believe in.

### 3.1. Joseph Reavley as a sustainer of morale

As protagonist of *Heroes*, Joseph Reavley is able to join in the men's jokes and laughter, appreciating their courage and friendship (Perry, 2007b: 22). In the quintet, as he struggles to maintain morale, he focuses on courage and belief, and on helping the injured or dying. The narrator mentions courage first, which is related to patriotic duty in the early stages of the war (Perry, 2005: 7). Belief is of secondary importance but comes before one of Reavley's most important functions, helping the wounded. As Reavley's story progresses, the three elements of morale – duty, belief and helping the wounded – vie with one another for prominence, causing him considerable anguish. By 1917, a new element is added: obedience. General Northrup, for example, reminds Reavley that keeping up morale results in obedience. When Reavley questions the wisdom of some of the general's orders, he is sharply reprimanded in the following uncompromising terms: "Morale is your job, not tactics" (Perry, 2007a: 36). Reavley's fury is not the result of his treatment by the general but a genuine concern for the safety and welfare of the soldiers in his regiment.

Reavley has no idea at this stage of the war that his success in maintaining morale will ultimately save him from being charged with assault: when he accompanies Lizzie Blaine, the nurse with whom he is in love, to Major Onslow's office to explain that she had been raped earlier by a soldier, the major is insulting and blames Lizzie for not reporting the incident at the time. Without warning, and uncharacteristically, Reavley punches him in the face. Onslow's response is a measure of Reavley's importance at the front: he acknowledges that the chaplain's ability to maintain morale and win the love of his soldiers is too precious to risk. "You are loved by the men", Onslow remarks. "I think if I were to charge you I would lose their support completely" (Perry, 2008: 269). Immediately after the incident, Reavley walks alone along an old supply trench, "remembering the men he had known who were gone" (Perry, 2008: 270). He reflects on "the good times, the jokes, the sharing, the long stories about home, the letters, the dreams, the future" (Perry, 2008: 270), and wonders if his men really love him as much as Major Onslow believes. He is sure of only one thing – that he has consistently put their welfare first.

From very early in his war career, the bravery of Joseph Reavley in rescuing the wounded at the front is emphasised. He is frightened and feels sick, and gas is an ever-present threat, but he perseveres in his efforts to save life. The narrator of *Shoulder the Sky* describes how he "bent to the wounded man just as there was another burst of shellfire, this time closer to them. The dirt rained down within a few yards" (Perry, 2005: 72–73). Reavley carries the wounded soldiers back to safety behind the front line, the weight of the bodies causing him to feel "as though his spine was breaking" (Perry, 2005: 73). The narrator focuses on Reavley's perseverance: "he could not stop: there were always more men down" (Perry, 2005: 73). The men cannot understand why Reavley exposes himself to such risks but they acknowledge their gratitude. Private Barshey expresses the sentiments of many as he remarks to Joseph, "Oi reckon you're a fool, Cap'n, but it's a sort of comfort. Oi'd like to think you'd come for me, whether Oi were any good or not. Because sometimes Oi think Oi'm fine, but other days Oi wake up with dead Jerries in moi 'ead [...] Oi need to think there's someone that'd come for me, no matter what." (Perry, 2005: 253–254).

It has taken only a few months for the soldiers to recognise the extent of Reavley's courage. Barshey's use of local dialect underlines the difference in social status between the men and their chaplain, but the sentiments expressed reveal the strength of the bond between Reavley and his men. The final three words, "no matter what", demonstrate that Reavley's loyalty to his men is absolute.

Many of those whom Reavley rescues die before reaching the casualty clearing station. In such cases, it is his task to conduct the burial services (Perry, 2005: 373). When losses are great, he reflects on the rushed nature of the ceremony: "there was often no time for anything but the briefest of decencies" (Perry, 2005: 99). His reflections stem from his memories of pre-war days, already distant after one year at the front. By 1917, funerals have become mechanical, "pointless" exercises in humanity because bodies are often unrecognisable, and sometimes all that is left is "a handful of identity tags" (Perry, 2007a: 112). Reavley tries to resolve the conflict between the dictates of compassion acquired in pre-war England and the harsh reality of conditions at the front. The few "brief words over white crosses" are accompanied by "the sound of guns in the distance" (Perry, 2005: 373). The sky forms a lead lid that rests on the shoulders of those attending the funeral. It acts as an impenetrable barrier between the promises of heaven and the evils on earth.

On the occasions when Reavley must choose between his men and his commanding officer, his loyalties lie firmly with the former, because he sees himself as one of them and his memories are locked to them (this is indeed given as his primary reason for returning to the front after his convalescence (Perry, 2006: 191)). The narrator of *Heroes* explains that Reavley "had known many of the men all his life" (Perry, 2007b: 8); they came from the same area in Cambridgeshire, had gone to the same school, "scrumped apples from the same trees, fished in the same rivers, and walked the same lanes" (Perry, 2007b: 8). His loyalty to his men is made still clearer in the quintet. In his relations with Major Northrup, for

example, Reavley does not hesitate to support his men against the incompetence of the major, whose orders have caused unnecessarily high casualties. When Reavley tries to explain that it is pointless and suicidal to carry out the new raid ordered by Northrup (an order that has been disobeyed by Corporal Gee in an effort to save the lives of his men), the major accuses Reavley of failing to execute his primary task of maintaining morale. Reavley's retort reveals the gulf between himself and his commanding officer: "I am thinking of morale, sir [...] Court-martialing one of our best soldiers because he won't lead his men on a suicidal mission is going to do infinitely more harm than the losses overnight" (Perry, 2007a: 102).

When Northrup is murdered by one of his own unit (he is shot by Lance-Corporal Geddes at an unofficial kangaroo court), Reavley is given the double task of finding the perpetrator and appearing in court to defend his men. In his efforts to protect the latter as well as the reputation of the major himself, he is unsure if he is working as a chaplain or as a captain. At the same time, he is asked to take on the duties of a detective, a mission for which he has no training and which will make him the object of suspicion among his men. At the resultant court martial, Reavley makes his loyalties abundantly clear, summarising as he does so what he believes that war is all about:

On the battlefield a soldier's loyalty is to the men who fight beside him, and to those for whom he is responsible. We fight for king and country, give our lives if necessary, endure injury, hardship and sometimes appalling pain, but we do it here. These are the men whose backs we defend, whose lives we save, or who save ours, whose rations we share, with whom we laugh, and weep, and face the evening, and whose wounds we will try to staunch if we can, or who will carry us back from no-man's-land – dead or alive. Loyalty is not an idea here, sir, it is the price of life. (Perry, 2007a: 435)

Loyalty is owed to all ranks: fighting soldiers, officers and "king and country". It involves sharing pain as well as joy, rescuing as well as being rescued. Reavley teaches Faulkner, the prosecutor, an important lesson at the same time as he acknowledges the latter's superior rank by addressing him as "sir". As Reavley addresses the jury, he reveals that he sees himself as one of the men: "Many of us will never leave here. We know that, and we accept it" (Perry, 2007a: 449). His victory in the court and the resulting demonstration of comradeship from his fellow soldiers (they lift him triumphantly on their shoulders and bear him out of the court room) enable him to see the war through to the end.

While the hearing is a victory for Reavley, it is also a reminder of his conflicting and isolated position in the army. Faulkner tries to use Reavley's multiple loyalties to weaken his case for the defence. Reavley is accused of exceeding his position as captain and "priest in uniform" (Perry, 2007a: 437) and reprimanded for judging his superior officer, Major Northrup, in what is described as "a despicable act" (Perry, 2007a: 439). Faulkner even tries to discredit Reavley's testimony about Geddes's involvement in the crime by suggesting that Reavley is unsure whether he is acting as a captain or a chaplain

(Perry, 2007a: 443); in his capacity as a chaplain, Reavley could be accused of breaking the sanctity of confession. When the cross-examination turns to the involvement of an ambulance driver in the escape (the driver was, as Reavley knows, Judith, his own sister), Reavley declares that he made it his business not to discover the driver's identity as it was his primary duty as an officer to return the escapees to face trial. This successfully "redressed the situation, without betrayal of any trust" (Perry, 2007a: 444), the narrator explains.

Faulkner is not convinced because he is determined to prove that Reavley has not acted as an officer, whose primary concern must be the interests of the country; instead, he has acted as a chaplain, who wishes to preserve the lives of the men with whom he has grown up and for whom he was once responsible as a tutor at St John's College (he has also acted as a brother, which worries Faulkner less). Reavley's conduct in his cross-examination of General Northrup, a necessary measure to prove Geddes's motive (revenge for the Northrup family's ruination of his own family), is fraught owing to his inferior rank and his duty as a chaplain to save the general from unnecessary discomfort and embarrassment. While Faulkner's closing speech emphasises "law, justice, and the values the army and the country stood for" (Perry, 2007a: 449), Reavley focuses on the courage of the men fighting under horrific circumstances, the need to trust one another in times of crisis, and the loyalty that is the special mark of a fighting soldier. Reavley also reminds the court that Captains Morel and Cavan were doing their duty as officers by trying to curb Major Northrup: they could do no less in view of the trust that the men had placed in them (Perry, 2007a: 450). Geddes's conviction is the kind of justice that the court and Reavley can accept because it is based on a true understanding of the situation of the ordinary fighting soldier. As chaplain, however, Reavley feels regret that he was not able to save the life of a man who had attempted to preserve the honour of his family.

### 3.2 Reavley and questions of faith

The trial is a turning point in Reavley's war career because "he had found a decision within himself and been prepared to pay the price of it, bitter as it was. He had not flinched. He had repaid the trust. Now he was dizzy with hope and a searing promise of faith, a belief in the possibility of the impossible, even out of utter darkness." (Perry, 2007a: 452). The "searing promise of faith", however, refers to a belief in humanity and the continuation of life. His relationship with his God, on the other hand, is troubled and is clearly demonstrated in the earlier short story.

In *Heroes*, Reavley recognises that God has "little meaning" (Perry, 2007b: 17) for the men. In the quintet, when the journalist Mason suggests that there is no point in talking about God, divine destiny and belief, Reavley replies that he has learned not to tell people what they should do because they are already doing their best (Perry, 2005: 296). The implication is that at this early stage (1915) Reavley does not know how to talk about God under such extreme circumstances. As the war progresses, he increasingly notes that dying soldiers call not for God but for their mothers (Perry, 2007a: 6). He understands this because he, too, regularly loses sight of God in the midst of such horrors and suffering. By 1918, Reavley has

entirely given up trying to explain God and His role in war because he does not understand it himself (Perry, 2008: 291).

Before the war, Reavley's faith had been severely shaken by the death of his wife, Eleanor, and their child in childbirth. To compensate, he had built a new world based on "reason, impersonal order, the sanity of the mind" (Perry, 200: 188). Such "sanity" belongs to the pre-war world that is Reavley's own mental creation. Despite his belief to the contrary, this vision cannot "sustain him through anything" (Perry, 2004: 189) because it is incapable of accommodating the horror and suffering of war. By the end of 1914, he asks himself if he trusts God at all: "Was it a relationship of spirit to spirit? Or just an idea that lasted only until he tried to make it carry the weight of pain or despair?" (Perry, 2004: 275). He has cause to return to these questions many times in the following months and years at the front. When on the final page of *No Graves as Yet* he assures his siblings Matthew and Judith that "We shall have to carry our own light [...] the best we can" (Perry, 2004: 314), it is unclear to both Reavley and the reader whether God forms any part of this "light".

After only a very short time at the front, Reavley is increasingly bothered by the question "What kind of a God hurled you into this hell without teaching you what you were supposed to do, to say, even to think, in order to keep your faith?" (Perry, 2005: 46). Because he has no answer, his isolation and sense of powerlessness are profound. In trying to answer questions about the meaning of life, the horrors of war and the role of God, Reavley attempts to find solutions to some of his own questions too. This gives him comfort in retrospect, as shown when he acknowledges, in his letter of condolence to Mrs Hughes on the death of her son, Captain Geraint Hughes: "I think in trying to answer him honestly, which he deserved, I answered a few of my own questions also" (Perry, 2005: 83). Even though Reavley gradually forgets Captain Hughes, the answers to his questions become part of his understanding of life, of war and of God, and an integral part of his new identity.

The answers are not sufficient, however, and his fear of not being able to answer the soldiers' questions increases as the war progresses. As Joseph compares the past with the present, he recognises that he has fewer and fewer answers, and new questions continually arise: would anyone believe him if he claimed that there was meaning behind the slaughter? How could he repeat the simple phrases learned in his earlier life and in a different world: "What kind of a man looked on living hell like this and mouthed comfortable, simple phrases he did not even believe himself?" (Perry, 2005: 104). Reavley's questions about man echo his question about God quoted above. His doubts increase his sense of isolation because he cannot confess to his men that his former faith might have been a creation of his own needs, loneliness and fear. The reader is reminded of this in *At Some Disputed Barricade*, when Reavley cannot find any explanations for Private Snowy, whose brother has just been killed (Perry, 2007a: 5), and when the narrator observes that for a chaplain to fail to come up with an answer is tantamount to "admitting that God Himself did not know; that He had somehow become confused and lost control" (Perry, 2007a: 119).

Reavley's increasing spiritual torment augments his feeling of isolation, which is in turn enhanced by memory. As he reflects on his former life in the final novel, *We Shall Not Sleep*, and particularly on his teaching career at St John's, he realises that "it's a little divorced from the reality of living" (Perry, 2008: 10). Academic studies, he concludes, are only "a small part of the enormity of life" (Perry, 2008: 12). His comparisons with his former life cause him to acknowledge that the mind and heart must be touched with the passion of friendship that springs from care and love. He begins to visualise a much more concrete form of ministry, serving all kinds of needs – mental, emotional, spiritual and physical. He acknowledges to himself that he had never understood what heaven was until he discovered "the love that never betrays" (Perry, 2008: 56) that is so important in war. To carry out his new mission, he concludes, it is necessary to have occasional "dark nights of the soul" (Perry, 2008: 159) because, without knowledge of despair, hope can never be real.

It is this knowledge that helps him to make the right decision with regard to Lizzie Blaine and her unborn child. He concludes that to desert her "would destroy the bedrock of all his own faith" (Perry, 2008: 271). He has not turned away from suffering soldiers, and neither will he desert Lizzie. Reavley recognises that all have been damaged by the war; Lizzie is no different. He also understands that with Lizzie's support he can realise the vision that the suffering of war has brought about: the importance of caring for men's souls not only in a spiritual sense but in a pastoral one also. "I've learned something about what a real ministry is" (Perry, 2008: 345), he tells Lizzie, as he proposes marriage. Only at the end of the war, on the eve of the Armistice, does he realise the real purpose of his life. With his commitment to Lizzie made, and with the promise of a new ministry, he can return to Flanders for the last few days of the war to fulfil his duty towards his men and justify their trust in him once and for all.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

With the exception of the minister in Mackenzie Ford's *Gifts of War*, the clergymen discussed here are profoundly changed by their involvement in war. Their understanding of their role becomes more complex as the practices and ideals of peacetime are reinterpreted in the light of the horrors and suffering at the western front. Memories of pre-war England provide both comfort and challenges as the ministers learn to adapt mentally, emotionally, spiritually and physically. The complacency of Christopher Ryan's minister and his conviction that the British Army is always the right result in the sacrifice of Christopher Ransom. Ransom's case is not only remembered by the minister but, as the narrator urges in his postscript, is destined to become part of the reader's memory too.

Hallam Kerr in Anne Perry's quintet demonstrates that the minister on the home front has a valuable though different part to play in the war. Memories of pre-war England and a quiet parish in rural Cambridgeshire gradually fade as wounded soldiers return and families lose their sons. Under Joseph Reavley's guidance, Kerr learns to comfort the bereaved. Romantic notions of patriotic combat are replaced by the realities of ministering to the

needs of the wounded – physical, emotional and spiritual.

Reavley, the protagonist of Anne Perry's *Heroes*, learns how to maintain morale among the fighting soldiers. He discovers he has talent as a detective and uses this to the advantage of his men: the sacrifice of Captain Holt is necessary even if it causes Reavley considerable pain. He consistently stands on the side of his fellow soldiers and he is responsible for their spiritual care. The pastoral dimension of Reavley's role is important not only in the short story but in his mission as a chaplain at the front in the war quintet. In the latter, memories of his past life as Eleanor's husband and as tutor at St John's College are contrasted with the harsh realities of the front. Only by sharing the sufferings of his men can Reavley understand his true role in life and the nature and responsibilities of a real ministry.

Chaplains do not deserve the bad press they have received. They were not "peripheral figures with a hazy and slightly dubious role" (Snape, 2005: 246) but played a vital part in maintaining morale, contacting bereaved families, rescuing the wounded and providing spiritual comfort. They stretched their non-combatant roles to the limits to serve their men. At the same time, the very foundations of their faith were challenged. While there were relatively few chaplains in World War One and few historical studies and novels have been written about them, they offer a unique opportunity to explore the ethical and emotional aspects of war, involving the reader in a series of moral choices towards which it is impossible to remain neutral.

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