



## The spiritual motivations of the fighter

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**Among the factors that motivate combatants to fight, that of religious and more broadly spiritual convictions is now being questioned by the human sciences, after having previously been the subject of ideological debates. This dimension is broadly understood as ranging from fidelity to a revealed religion to a more informal religiosity. It involves two main complementary aspects: on the one hand, the rooted faith that stimulates and helps to justify the struggle being waged, and on the other, a "religion of emergency" that reflects the soldier's quest for assurance in the face of danger. Does spirituality therefore contribute to maintaining one's inner strength, and therefore one's fighting spirit? In war, the soldier is attached to beliefs and representations that help him to overcome the harsh reality. Spirituality is part of this dynamic, but it does not fully conform to it: it offers a glimpse of transcendence and humanity in a warlike horizon characterized by immanence and inhumanity. If it helps to increase a soldier's moral strength, it is primarily at the level of the individual and not at the level of the military community, because beliefs are personal even if their expression is social. It can also meet limits (it does not prevent stress). Conversely, war is also a source of spiritual awakening. A rough typology could distinguish the crusader, the believer and the incredulous. The former places his religion at the heart of his warrior commitment; the latter relies on his faith to adapt to war; the latter moves away from it, on the contrary, without this change affecting his combativeness. If spirituality can help the soldier to hold his own in the circumstances of war, it is rarely an adjunct to motivate him to fight, for it then presupposes not only faith but also religious reflection.**

The question of the motivations of combatants to fight refers to many factors, both individual and collective, including religious and more broadly spiritual convictions. It is now being questioned by the human sciences, after having previously been the subject of political or ideological debates. The religious extremism of jihadists faced by the French army also makes this question topical, even if it is only one aspect of it because of its radical nature. The spiritual dimension must indeed be understood in a broad sense,

ranging from attachment to a revealed religion with its dogmas, values and principles, to more informal feelings of religiosity. It is broadly divided into two aspects which are not, moreover, contradictory. On the one hand, there is the rooted and lived faith which motivates, carries and stimulates, and which can also give meaning to the struggle being waged, and even make it sacred; on the other hand, there is a kind of "religion of emergency" in which the man of war can seek consolation and assurance in the face of danger and death. The historian François Cochet sees it as one of the soldier's "crutches".<sup>1</sup>. Does faith in transcendence, a spiritual approach, and attachment to strong religious convictions contribute to the inner strength, and therefore the fighting spirit, of soldiers? How, if at all, do they contribute to it? It will be a question of showing the moral strength of spirituality, then its limits and finally war as a source of spiritual awakening.

## The moral force of spirituality

The two aspects of the fighter's spirituality - as motivation and as a quest for protection - can be declined in several ways that suggest its moral power.

The combatant can first of all refer to the religious justification by his Church of the war he is waging: this is the traditional *jus ad bellum*. This legitimacy is manifest during the Great War or in 1939-1940, conflicts which the Churches then massively supported. On the other hand, they are more divided over Indochina and Algeria and, like most of French society, have generally been unaware of external operations since 1962. The summit of this religious justification is the spirit of crusade, but it is carried only by a tiny minority of combatants and leaders, such as Admiral d'Argenlieu.<sup>2</sup> in the Free French. The mobilization of the spiritual in the service of a war cause, and thus as a source of motivation to fight, balances nevertheless between two tendencies: one requires a culture, references, a reflection to analyse the conflict through the prism of a religious tradition, which goes beyond the simple spirituality of the majority; the other evolves towards an ideology without doctrinal, scriptural or dogmatic knowledge and reduced to "holy ignorance".<sup>3</sup> of the most radical. In the latter case, the religious tends to become a mere pretext.

But spirituality can nourish, even found the sense of duty of the soldier which appears more clearly to him in the case of a war considered to be just. The Catholic catechism has long recalled the importance of the "duty of state", one of the translations of which is obedience to temporal power, its laws, its leaders and its representatives. This dimension was particularly important at the time of conscription and general mobilization, since these affected all citizens. At Easter 1915, Fr. Louis Lenoir, a Jesuit military chaplain, preached as follows: "the Catholic faith is the great strength of the soldier ." It imposes as "sacred duties" those of "obedience to leaders, of bravery ..., of total self-sacrifice in the country . Finally, it gave him "the necessary comfort at times when [his] patriotism would weaken ".<sup>4</sup>.

For the professional soldier who has chosen the profession of arms, the stakes are partly other, even if obedience to orders received is still the basis of military discipline.

In the expectation or circumstances of combat, spirituality also appears as a source of moral support. Military chaplains from the two world wars are privileged witnesses to this, but comparable feelings are found even in the most recent conflicts, with various expressions. In the early 2000s, a Muslim officer wondered about the links between "religious practice and the exercise of the profession of arms": is it a question of

having "peace of mind to make war better ? »<sup>5</sup>. Some speak of a "lightning rod religion". In the face of hardships that have little to do with those that the civilian world of peacetime is accustomed to endure, religious sentiment contributes to consenting to conflict, to providing courage and determination. By adhering to the idea of transcendence, the man at war can find moral resources or elements of answers to his misgivings. By adhering to the idea of transcendence, man at war can find moral resources or elements of response to his tapestry, spiritual or religious worries - whatever their expression - which help him psychically to overcome the terrible or absurd situations with which he is confronted. This faith in transcendence allows him to move beyond the immediacy and immanence of the conflicting reality.

Finally, a moral code of confessional origin can guide the soldier and enlighten him as to the responsible behaviours to adopt. It refers to *jus in bello*, that is to say, to the respect of "the law in war" with regard to civilians, the wounded or prisoners of war.<sup>6</sup> Admittedly, it is more a question of ethics than of spirituality - although the two are less antinomic than complementary - and this approach is valid more for the manner than for the motivation to fight, even if it can be analysed as an extension of it. This intrinsic stake in warfare has become particularly sensitive since decolonization conflicts, where distinctions between enemy and friend, or between civilian and combatant, are sometimes difficult to make. This morality also distinguishes the soldier from the warrior. But it does not, on the contrary, exempt him from cases of conscience.

## Spiritual motivations and their limits

In 1880, a debate in the Chamber of Deputies pitted those in favour and those against maintaining a permanent military chaplaincy: The former justified its existence by the spiritual support it could provide to soldiers, arguing, as an example from the War of 1870, that a fighter with faith - in this case Catholic - fought better than one who did not believe in anything. The latter argued that Republicans with no religious ties had fought as well as others. The point is not to resolve this political controversy, which shows that the question of the spiritual dimension has been raised for a long time, but to see the diversity of possible answers it implies, through the prism of the fighting experience.

When tested in war, the motivations to fight encounter limits, including in their spiritual dimension. This does not prevent low morale, fear and pusillanimity. It must not, nor can it be seen as a panacea in the face of the violence of war. We know that the experience of fire can lead to all sorts of mental or bodily reactions that are not always controllable. Moreover, the longer the war lasts, the more fragile the psychological and cultural barriers of those who wage it become. Thus, post-traumatic stress can affect otherwise well-balanced and over-trained soldiers, as it affects believers and non-believers alike. Colonel Ardant du Picq wrote that man "is body and soul; and no matter how strong the soul may be, it cannot tame the body to the point of revolting the flesh and disturbing the spirit in the face of destruction".<sup>7</sup> The spiritual element is not, therefore, a guarantee of tenacity or of the motivation of the combatant in war. Moreover, it should be combined with other factors, such as group cohesion, patriotism, sense of duty, sense of honour, attachment to the defended cause, the weight of traditions, etc. The spiritual element is not a guarantee of tenacity or motivation of the warrior. However, when tested against reality, all these factors also have their limits. A military chaplain in 1917 admitted that "in spite of our flexibility and our 'twists and turns,' we have 36 months of campaigning on our shoulders". He also avoided, "in [his] speeches, singing variations on the Chant du départ or La Marseillaise".<sup>8</sup>

Through its irrational violence, war also provokes doubts, even among convinced believers, and can even lead to abandonment of faith. In *The severed hand*, Blaise Cendrars states: "God is absent from the battlefields". The loss of faith - very little mentioned by the combatants - may not be as widespread as awakenings in times of conflict, but it does attest to the diversity of religious attitudes, even antinomic ones, brought about by the experience of war.

## War and spiritual awakening

The war does in fact raise spiritual awakenings. The phenomenon was seen on a large scale in the summer of 1914, when many mobilized people turned to their home churches. These were less conversions than "returns" to the faith of their childhood. Similarly, chaplains testified to the increase in religious practices or to the greater echo of their words near danger, on the eve of an assault, for example.

The risk of death or injury, separation from one's surroundings, but also the possibility of killing - even if this last theme often remains taboo - are the main reasons why he avoided singing variations on the *Chant du départ* or *La Marseillaise*. encourage reflection, introspection, meditation, a personal and inner process that can be described as spiritual. This does not necessarily lead to adherence to or a return to a revealed religion, but it raises the question of transcendence and, indirectly, of the meaning of the struggle being waged and the reasons for exposing one's life to it. This is what Brice Erbland, an ALAT officer, among others, has observed: "a society without religion is like a ship without a compass", Napoleon said... Many fighters become painfully aware of this in adversity, when their despair seeks healing in moral landmarks that their society has long since erased" <sup>9</sup>. Does this quest make the soldier stronger or at least help to calm him psychologically? The answers, of course, depend on each individual situation.

Sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger explains this return to religion by a "psychological or social compensation" for soldiers who find themselves in extreme situations or even simply "illegible" for them because of their complexity, such as certain missions of interposition.<sup>10</sup> But certainly the confrontation with death is decisive. In fact, soldiers willingly attend religious ceremonies in memory of their fallen comrades. Even if, "in the face of death", the historian Marc Bloch reminds us that he was "born a Jew", he does not have faith. This did not prevent him in 1915 from going to the church of La Neuville-au-Pont (Marne): " On more than one occasion, on my return from the trenches , I attended the services held there for the men of the 272nd Infantry Regiment who had just fallen to the enemy[ ...] I have always believed that I was doing a pious duty by commemorating our dead. What did I care about the rites? »<sup>11</sup>. This spiritual awakening can take many different forms, including religiosity and even superstition, outside of established religions. If this diversity was already evident during the Great War, it has been reinforced in our time, when all religious culture has been weakened.

Spirituality is therefore lived in a more individual way. However, the social dimension of religion can also be an element of solidarity, or even cohesion, for soldiers - without it being imposed by the hierarchy or by the environment.

## Conclusion

In war, the soldier is attached to values, beliefs and representations that help him to overcome the harsh reality he has experienced. Spirituality is part of this dynamic, but without conforming to it completely: it gives a glimpse of transcendence and humanity in a warlike horizon characterized by immanence and inhumanity. Does it contribute to increasing the moral strength of the soldier and thus his mental capacity or will to fight? The answer lies partly at the level of the individual, not at the level of the military community, because beliefs are in the personal and intimate sphere even if their expression has a social dimension. Therefore, this answer invites us to consider a summary typology, schematically distinguishing between the crusader, the believer and the incredulous. The former would place his religion at the heart of his warlike commitment; the latter would rely on his faith - with variable perimeter, content and expressions - to face or adapt to war; the latter would, on the contrary, distance himself from it, without this posture affecting his combativeness. The most general trait, it seems, is that spirituality can help the soldier to hold his own in the circumstances of war. But it is only exceptionally an adjunct to motivate the soldier to fight, since it presupposes not only feelings, but also a culture and a reflection of a religious nature that is not very widespread.

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**1** François COCHET: Surviving the 1914-1918 front. Les Poilus entre contrainte et consentement, Saint-Cloud, Soteca - 14-18 editions, p. 210.

**2** Thomas VAISSET : L'amiral d'Argenlieu, Paris, Belin, 2017, 595 p.

**3** Olivier ROY : La sainte ignorance. Le temps de la religion sans culture, Paris éd. du Seuil, 2008, 288 p.

**4** Quoted by G. GUITTON, Un " preneur " d'âmes, Louis Lenoir, aumônier des marsouins 1914-1917, Paris, de Gigord, 1922, p. 165-167.

**5** Sahbi SALAH : Pratique religieuse et exercice du métier des armes : la paix de l'âme pour mieux faire la guerre ?, Inflexions, n° 9, juin-sept. 2008, p. 81.

**6** See, for example, Renaud de MALAUSSÈNE: Une guerre juste ?, Paris, Alisio, 2019 (not. chap. 7, "Comment fonder l'éthique ? "p. 103 ff.).

**7** Charles ARDANT du PICQ: Études sur le combat. Combat antique et combat moderne, Paris, Economica [1880], 2004, p. 35.

**8** Le Prêtre aux Armées, August 1, 1917.

**9** Brice ERBLAND: In the Claws of the Tiger. Accounts by a combat helicopter pilot officer in Afghanistan and Libya. February-October 2011, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2013, p. 23.

**10** Danièle HERVIEU-LÉGER: Expérience militaire et expérience religieuse: un point de vue de sociologue du religieux, Inflexions, No. 10, January-March 2009, p. 75.

**11** Marc BLOCH: Souvenirs de guerre 1914-1915, in: L'Histoire, la Guerre, la Résistance, Paris, Gallimard, Quarto, 2006, p. 135.

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