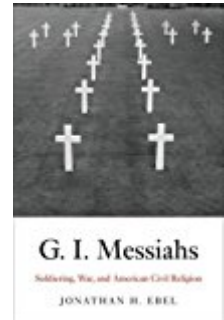


Jonathan Ebel. *G. I. Messiahs: Soldiering, War, and American Civil Religion.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015. 256 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-17670-4.



Reviewed by Jacqueline Whitt

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Jonathan Ebel's second book solidifies his place as one of the leading voices in a growing field examining the relationship between the history of religion and the history of war and the military. Ebel lays out the book's lines of inquiry—its two stories—this way: “The first [story] involves the presentation of the American soldier to America's publics, moments of public connection with the soldier as a living symbol. The second [story] considers the ways that soldiers have interacted with America's publics and with their symbolized selves, the ways that real servicemen and –women shape and are shaped by expectations, beliefs, and memories of the soldier” (pp. 1-2). He then aims to connect these two stories to the realm of American civil religion, which creates and sustains a national mythos of American purpose and destiny.

G. I. Messiahs is a broad but deeply nuanced examination of the symbolism of the American soldier in the twentieth century vis-à-vis American civil religion. It is, at once, a book about very real, very embodied individuals—Wesley Everest,

Charles Whittlesey, Felicita Hecht, Francis Gary Powers, Dwight Johnson, Pat Tillman—and a book about the more abstract, collective group of service members—soldiers buried in ABMC cemeteries, the unknown soldiers entombed at Arlington, prisoners of war, Vietnam veterans. But it is also, and perhaps most importantly, a book about the meaning that is inscribed onto these service members in the civil-religious discourse of the twentieth- and twenty-first-century United States. Ebel is especially interested in and attuned to the “indeterminacy of symbols” (p. 52) and the ways in which the soldier-as-symbol has been constructed, replicated, and contested, and reasserted over time.

Ebel argues that at its core, the place of the “soldier” is a messianic one within the church of the American nation. It is deeply imbued with explicitly Christian symbolism, language, ritual, and meaning. Importantly the soldier's own faith is almost immaterial in this drama: plain white crosses at ABMC cemeteries elide most distinctions (other than Christian and Jew); Pat Tillman, an

atheist, is held up as the embodiment of Christian values. Soldiers and their bodies are appropriated as symbols; they become the nation incarnate—the word, made flesh. Soldiers save the United States, as Christ saved humanity, “with their bodies, enduring suffering, and sometimes sacrificing their lives” (p. 7). The only part of the messianic myth that seems to go unexplored is the explicit idea of resurrection—sacrificed soldiers tend to stay dead, though their memory lives on for years after their war ends.

As one might expect, the introduction frames the theoretical and historiographical underpinnings for the work and the conclusion offers some provocative and forward-looking analytical perspectives as the United States moves into the second decade of the twenty-first century. The body of the book, then, is built around six case studies, which, as they move through time chronologically, also develop thematically, to explore the idea of the G. I. Messiah and its connection to American civil religion.

The first three chapters cover American involvement in the world wars in the first half of the twentieth century and serve to establish a vocabulary for understanding the orthodox (though not universal) narrative about the soldier and civil religion. In these chapters, Ebel uses a comparative structure to explore the variegated meaning of soldierly bodies related to civil religious discourse. The first chapter explores the idea of the incarnation of the G. I. Messiah using two episodes, a veteran’s day parade that ends in a lynching and a small-town Christmas sermon in the wake of the Great War, to explore spaces between the soldierly ideal and the embodied reality of war. In the second instance, readers are asked to confront the idea of the known and unknown soldier—here contrasting the stories of Charles Whittlesey, a famously decorated soldier of the lost battalion who died of suicide when he found himself unable to fully reintegrate into the society that had sent him to war (“wars add layers

of the unknown to those who wage them,” p. 68) and the selection, interment, and national honor for the unknown soldier of the Great War, whose individual identity was purposely erased in service to the nation—in his anonymity and remembrance, “filled with a Christian particularity and a militant heroism,” becoming every soldier and all soldiers at once (p. 60). In each chapter, the careful selection of cases and examples and highlights and complements the overall argument.

The last three chapters deal with more politically fraught territory—the Korean War and the Cold War, the war in Vietnam, and the Global War on Terror. In these chapters, the contested meaning of the G.I. Messiah is at the heart of Ebel’s analysis. In these instances, the orthodox interpretation has not disappeared (in some cases Ebel argues it has been strengthened), but is more tenuous, as public and private voices have tried to “make civil religious sense of the space between the orthodox soldierly ideal and discordant soldierly realities” (pp. 22-23).

In this second section, Ebel approaches well-known subjects with fresh clarity and fresh interpretations. In the case of Francis Gary Powers, the downed U-2 pilot captured in the Soviet Union, Ebel explores the idea of ritual failure: what happens when soldiers don’t play along, when they don’t perform according to social and political expectations of the soldierly ideal. Ebel reads Powers’s actions, both public and private, in light of the popular-culture-infused notions of the soldierly ideal based on narratives of the Second World War, the expectation of self-sacrifice and heroism by American service members, and the Cold War contest between the United States and the Soviet Union. Ebel’s commentary on Pat Tillman’s life, service, death, and cover-up of said death is refreshing and insightful. He emphasizes (contrary to most writing about Tillman) his ordinariness, and this allows Ebel to navigate a host of competing claims about Tillman’s motivations, actions, and humanity. Ebel’s reevaluation of Powers and

Tillman in light of his broader argument alone would make the book worth reading.

Military historians who are interested in the social and cultural history of war, the experience of soldiering, the process of meaning making and reintegration into society for veterans, the broad civil-military relationship, or the nexus of religion and the military will find ample food for thought in *G. I. Messiah*s. The book offers a refreshing and new perspective on these themes, and will be an important reference for historical works that examine soldiers in these conflicts more specifically. Because of its breadth and thematic focus, the work occasionally lacks the depth of historical context that a more traditional event- or individual-driven monograph might provide. In most chapters, for example, Ebel only glosses the particulars of political or geopolitical implications of the wars in which soldiers are engaged. The Vietnam War, though American involvement lasted for more than two decades, including eight years of major combat operations, is treated as a relatively unchanging and unitary conflict. World War II and the Cold War receive similarly flat treatment. In his attention to the nuance of the narratives told about soldiers and the meaning of soldiering, and, indeed to the changing memory of American wars, Ebel perhaps loses some of the nuance and complexity of the wars as understood by military historians.

Ebel's fluency in the specialized vocabulary of both religious history and the world of the military is evident throughout the work. For readers familiar with religious studies, Ebel's discussions of orthodoxy, civil religion, Robert Bellah, J. Z. Smith, Christology, ritual performance, symbolism, lived religion, and sacrifice add analytical and theoretical depth to the book. Readers unfamiliar with this literature may find that reading with an open reference book and wading through the footnotes, though requiring some additional time, yields significant dividends. Even without any supplement, however, Ebel navigates these

theoretical waters deftly; the writing is lively, and the theory never overtakes the story Ebel is telling. Although the style, interpretation, and language will feel vastly more comfortable for scholars of religion than for traditional military historians, Ebel's own background of service in the US Navy lends the book a sensitivity to and familiarity with military history, organizations, and culture that surely strengthen the book. As trained military historians explore new directions for scholarly analysis and interpretation, and as scholars trained in other fields and disciplines venture into subjects dealing with war and the military, this type of work contributes to fruitful stretching in all directions.

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