

Faith and Fighting

An Interview with Canon Professor Michael Snape

Michael Snape

Canon Professor Michael Snape, Michael Ramsey Professor of Anglican Studies at Durham University

Abstract

The following is an interview hosted by the *Journal of the Oxford Graduate Theological Society* (JOGTS) with Canon Professor Michael Snape—Michael Ramsey Professor of Anglican Studies at Durham University—in February 2023. We discussed the themes of “Faith and Fighting” in theology and religion in relation to Professor Snape’s extensive scholarship and historical work on the relationship between religion and warfare. The interview was conducted by Dallas Callaway and Victoria Phillips.

Journal of the Oxford Graduate Theological Society (JOGTS): How did you first become interested in your work on warfare and ethics? Was there an “Ah-ha!” moment that made you recognise your desire to pursue this line of inquiry?

Professor Michael Snape (MS): No. There wasn't any kind of spontaneous sense of inspiration. Yet, one of the things that struck me growing up in the latter decades of the twentieth century was the number of people around me who had undertaken some kind of military service. My father, my grandfather, neither of whom were professional soldiers, but that was a common pattern in the United Kingdom at the time. Even though we'd never had a Vietnam experience and conscription had ended in 1963, there were still plenty of people who'd been in the First World War, in the Second World War, or who had undertaken National Service in the post-Second World War years. And that was a phenomenon. British society today has a far smaller percentage of people who would have immediate contact with family members who had served in any capacity.



But in my own generation, it was quite common. I was always struck by the faith-lives of people who had experienced military service, who had experienced conflict. And I was glad of the opportunity to begin to write about their experiences in a way—which seemed to me at the time, back at the beginning of this century—more objective than some of the writing which had dominated the historiography up to that point.

So, there was no “Damascene moment,” as it were. I began my academic career in 1994 in the post-Cold War era, the era of international optimism, when there was a great deal of faith in multi-nationalism. The end of the Cold War seemed to confirm an established narrative in the history of modern western Christianity and conflict, basically a fundamentally pacifist take on the subject. The role of the historian was to be critical of the “mistakes” which had been made in the past, and to call out church leaders for their failings, which served as object lessons in the Cold War era. And I was quite keen to diverge from that because I don't think it did justice to the whole panorama of experience and perspective.

As a post-graduate student, I didn't think I had permission to write on this subject—military history. I wanted permission to write in a particular vein, to look at [it] from a particular perspective. In the English-speaking world, to say the very least, the subject is often shunned implicitly and even explicitly. So, my original research, which I loved—which I felt very fulfilled by—was looking at Anglican life, or the life of members of the Church of England in 18th century England, in the northwest of England in an era of growing industrialisation. I loved that research, but it was really my former supervisor, Professor Hugh McLeod at Birmingham, who knew I had other interests. He was a series editor on Christianity and the Modern World for Routledge. In 1996/7, he asked me if I would be interested in writing a volume for that series on war and religion. And I thought, this is my opportunity, really. And I was very grateful for that chance, at that time, to write in that particular way.

JOGTS: In your recent book, you cover an expansive epoch: colonial and decolonisation conflicts, the two World Wars, the Cold War, and the Vietnam War. Based on your surveys of these specific conflicts, are there any theological and/or religious issues, themes or doctrines that have contributed to the onset and duration of these wars, such that you would now consider them to be recurrent or common to acts of warfare more generally?

MS: I'm not a theologian, let alone a systematic theologian. I'm speaking as a historian. But I can single out a tendency, as it were, for theology to be reactive to the situation of conflict. And there are a couple of headline themes that strike me from the British experience. One of the things which impacted British Protestantism very heavily in the First World War was the question of the afterlife and prayers for the dead. Now, prayers for the dead were extremely rare, even in the Church of England, let alone the Free Churches or in Scottish Presbyterianism or Irish Presbyterianism or the Church of Ireland, before the First World War. But the

overwhelming pastoral need to provide comfort to relatives who had lost young men as soldiers in the trenches of the Western Front and elsewhere forced a nascent reconsideration of the concept or doctrine of the communion of saints, the efficacy of prayers for the dead.

And so, what had been a controversial practice in the Church of England in 1914 was widely accepted as standard practice by 1918. There were some bumps along the way: protests in 1917 by a couple of Evangelical bishops about forms of prayer which had been issued under the authority of the archbishops of Canterbury and York on the third anniversary of the outbreak of the war, August 1917. There were objections that these forms of prayer included explicit prayers for the dead. But by 1918, even those protests died away. And now, although it's often fudged (we "remember before God", as it were) the idea of praying for the dead, or at least moving in that direction, particularly the war dead, is something which is now common practice, particularly in the Church of England. So that's one reactive element.

Second, one of the things that's been overlooked in our understanding of how theological themes are shaped to meet the requirements or the needs of wartime situations is the theme of sacrifice. It's often argued that church leaders, particularly in the First World War, emphasised the need to go out and kill Germans. There is a rather spurious story that the Bishop of London delivered a sermon in 1915 in which he exhorted his listeners to "Kill Germans". And that's not only a mistake in terms of [the] misreading of what actually happened, but of the dominant theological theme. The need to sacrifice oneself, the need to be prepared to sacrifice for a greater end, fed into army morale during both World Wars and, to a large extent, still feeds into military morale today. The idea is that one's service, one's sacrifice, will help to create a better world, which, in a sense, is redemptive and therefore Christ-like. This is a very interesting theme which commentators have overlooked: if one looks at what sermon literature has survived from military chaplains—British military chaplains in the First World War—the emphasis is on sacrifice, not on going out and killing the enemy. But that particular theme has tremendous traction. And even speaking to chaplains today and looking at the literature which exists on the British military, this still has tremendous traction in military circles.

Those two themes, prayer for the dead and sacrifice, met with the theological concept of the suffering God. [Geoffrey Studdert] Kennedy popularised this in his very colloquial fashion. Kennedy, being a very famous British army chaplain, otherwise known as "Woodbine Willie", popularised the notion of the suffering God. Jürgen Moltmann seized hold of and ran with this, particularly in the 1960s and 70s. Now it's a theological commonplace. But at the time, in the years of the First World War, it was earth-shaking in terms of what Kennedy was proposing about the nature of God and the concern of God for the suffering of humanity—and the involvement of God.

JOGTS: Going back to the theme of sacrifice. Is there more of an emphasis of this in Anglican circles? What about passages of scripture? Do they talk about Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, or is it centred around Christ?

MS: In many respects, it's a mix. It's a hybrid approach. Think of the way in which the cross, in terms of British military memorialisation, is still the central symbol of sacrifice for acts of commemoration. There are attempts by Humanists to try and secularise this kind of cult of memorialisation/remembrance. But I can't see it working because it's so ingrained in the way things are done. I think one of the dangers, obviously, of this particular tendency, is to elide the suffering of the service man or woman with the suffering of Christ. Theologians and church people in the First World War, when this discourse was popularised, felt very uneasy with this use of the redemptive sacrifice of Christ in warfare. And it's very easy to see why they felt uneasy with that elision. However, sacrifices are made [and allusions are made to them] indirectly. If you look at the architecture of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemeteries, which are famous and prototypical of military cemeteries throughout the world, the Cross of Sacrifice that stands in the middle of each one of these was deliberately named and designed by a son of the Bishop of London. The Stone of Remembrance, which is also situated in Commonwealth War Graves cemeteries, is not only altar-like, but it also alludes to the potential sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham, the willingness of one generation to see another sacrificed, because the call of the Divine is so strong, and requires that sacrifice.

The tropes of sacrifice are drawn from several quarters. And all of these quarters were appropriated for the purpose of explaining the need for perseverance and sustaining the suffering which war inevitably entails.

JOGTS: Let's shift to contemporary topics and the current world stage. In your recent book, the concluding chapter contains some early reflections on the war in Ukraine in the months after it began. It has been nearly a year since you penned these reflections. How would you assess or change those reflections now?

MS: The postscript to the book was something which I never anticipated writing. It was written on the hoof as the book was going through production. But the themes that I raised, the ideas, the questions, the critique, have stood the test of time. I was critical of the way in which what is effectively a functional pacifism had taken over, not just the outlook of the Church of England, but many mainstream churches in the West. That left them ill-prepared to comment on the act of aggression and Putin's invasion of Ukraine. And the game of catch-up has been quite interesting. For example, the Archbishop of Canterbury is leery of using the term "Just War," but he said only last week that Ukraine's defence of itself, its own nationhood, has to be defended, has to be supported by the West, and that the act of invasion was an act of monumental evil.

This language echoes the language used by the archbishops of Canterbury and York on the day of the invasion. So, there is a movement towards accepting that, in certain circumstances, there is a need to actually arm and sustain a particular war effort. Now, this is moving somewhat from the dominant mood of the Church of England's view of war in the early years of the century, in the light of Iraq, arguably even of Afghanistan, as well.

This is a war which could well last for a number of years, and one whose outcome could enable a further invasion of Taiwan by China. We are living in a world which is haunted by state-on-state conflict, which we were told was not going to happen after the fall of the Soviet Union. And it has returned with a vengeance.

The churches need to reengage with the “Just War” tradition to come to terms with a consistent and Christian perspective on conflict. Today, obviously, there is the nuclear shadow. There are all sorts of complications, which generations in the past, or certainly before 1945, didn't have to negotiate. There is a major, major need for a reconsideration of the church's view on war and peace—and other issues which are corollaries of that. The Church of England, quite rightly, had set itself against the arms trade, as had many other churches. But of course, we see arms flowing into Ukraine in abundance at present. It's boom time for arms dealers.

All of this must be factored into the church's reappraisal of its approach to questions of war and peace, which had drifted. It had not moved *consciously* into what I have called functional pacifism. There needs to be a shakeup, a thoroughgoing revisiting of these perspectives. That's not to say that Christian pacifism is illegitimate; it is something that that should be challenged. I'm calling for a thoroughgoing appraisal of possible responses, that are informed, intelligent, and aware of the issues which are driving the foreign policies of authoritarian regimes. Not only in Russia and China, but elsewhere.

JOGTS: Has the Church of England's response to the war in the Ukraine been similar or dissimilar, relative to World War II or the Cold War?

MS: During the First and the Second World Wars, if you look at the leadership of the Church of England as represented by the two archbishops, there was a predictable, but nonetheless a considered, response. One was triggered by the invasion of Belgium by Germany in August 1914; the other was triggered by the invasion of Poland by Germany in September 1939. Even if not closely articulated in terms of “Just War” theory, there was a clear response. Britain in 1914 and 1939 was justified in taking up arms. A similar view was taken in 1950 with North Korea's invasion of South Korea. In order to uphold the authority of the fledgling United Nations, there was a more convergent approach adopted between church and state. That's not to say that the leadership of the Church of England was marching in lockstep with military strategists or politicians. Something which is very much underplayed in the literature, which deserves to be

stressed more, is the capacity of the churches to be a critical friend, even in the context of armed conflict. One can look at the view taken by Archbishop [Randall] Davidson in the First World War of the use of poison gas, and the bombing of civilian areas in Germany, although aerial bombing of civilian targets was very much in its infancy in the First World War. So, there were those points of difference.

And in the Second World War, Archbishop [William] Temple in the Church of England came out very strongly against something which was known as “hate training” in the British Army. It was a method of training which was designed to inculcate a sense of personal hatred towards the enemy. These training methods, which focused on the use of the bayonet, involved copious quantities of all sorts of rather dodgy accessories, such as quantities of animal blood. It is not the business of the church to condone the cultivation of hate. Hate is not part of the “Just War” tradition. The “Just War” tradition is rooted in love. “Hate training” was contrary to what the Church of England expected the state to support and for the military authorities to condone. These stands should be more widely recognised.

The iconic position taken by the Church of England in the Second World War was obviously Bishop George Bell's position vis-a-vis strategic bombing. It has been celebrated in the post-war and nuclear era by Bell's admirers. There was division over this approach among the bishops of the Church of England. Archbishop Temple, a hero of the post-war Church of England, died prematurely in 1944. Temple, who had a very balanced view of things, wasn't prepared to condemn strategic bombing. He didn't see the difference between strategic bombing in this context of the Second World War, and the bombardment of medieval cities by catapults in centuries gone by, because they're all indiscriminate—all unpleasant, as it were.

The legacy of strategic bombing has haunted the imagination of the Church of England, particularly as the threat of nuclear weapons took danger to another level. Even though the Church of England didn't come out four-square against the strategic bombing of Germany, or indeed Japan, during the Second World War, it didn't mean that the Church of England was uncritical. And that capacity of being a critical friend, I think, needs to be recognised in the historiography.

JOGTS: Your work has also examined the fascinating, if alarming and disturbing, period of human history which marked the advent of weaponry endowed with the capacity for not only mass casualties, but indeed the complete annihilation of humankind. As you've studied persons living and writing during this period, have you found that specific doctrines of eschatology, immortality, or something else, have emerged as salient or otherwise at the forefront of ecclesial practice?

MS: Classic Christian apocalyptic imaginary fed into opposition to nuclear weapons. The early leaders of the CND [Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament] often represented people of faith. One of the first chairs of CND was John Collins, Canon of St. Paul's Cathedral, who had been an RAF [Royal Air Force] chaplain in the Second World War, and had opposed strategic bombing. The Book of Revelation and other classic Christian imaginings feed into visions of a nuclear apocalypse and inform opposition to them.

But some of the theology done under this heading was actually quite mundane. Archbishop Geoffrey Fisher, Archbishop of Canterbury throughout the 1950s, said that as far as he knew, it was not necessarily part of God's plan that God didn't want to see nuclear Armageddon. Maybe that was part of the whole scheme of humanity's history. Now, that might sound incredibly callous to us, but he wasn't an accomplished theologian. He was simply commenting on the fact that maybe this nuclear era is a sign of the end of time. Maybe this is something which is all part of an eschatology, which, however uncomfortable, is nonetheless working itself out.

Christopher Chavasse, the bishop of Rochester in the 1950s, had served as an army chaplain in the First World War. He had opposed the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, but during the 1950s, he began to adopt a pro-nuclear-weapon stance, seeing that the threat was strong, particularly with the Korean War and with the [Soviet] crushing of the Hungarian Uprising in 1956. There was the intention, centred in Moscow—arguably Beijing, as well—to ensure that the world turn communist, and that perhaps nuclear Armageddon was a preferable option. Now, we might shrink and recoil from all of this, but this is somebody who is speaking from the experience of two World Wars, who, particularly in the aftermath of the Second World War, had begun to see things in starkly dualistic terms: good and evil.

It's an uncomfortable reflection, but that's what a bishop of the Church of England was saying in the 1950s. And I think, again, what's interesting is the famous debate, which was held in the Church of England in the early 1980s in General Synod, about “The Church and the Bomb” report, which advocated unilateral nuclear disarmament. What led the Synod to vote this down was the intervention of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, who had actually earned a Military Cross as a tank commander in Northwest Europe in 1945. The Church of England, in terms of the Archbishop of Canterbury at that time, was unique in having a war hero at its head. Robert Runcie said he didn't see unilateralism, even at the time of heightened tensions between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, as the best guarantee of future peace, or as the best means of avoiding nuclear Armageddon. To come from somebody like Runcie, a very respected Archbishop of Canterbury, with a strong military record—and also somebody who had actually killed people—was a very strong pastoral intervention. He should be understood and comprehended and appreciated more widely. The constant problem is that those who say that,

under certain circumstances, war might be the least bad option, are easily opening themselves to charges of being pro-war.

In terms of my own work, I have run that risk—I have taken criticism for that. What I'm arguing for is a greater awareness of the *pacifists*. It's a hard term to enunciate—the *pacifist*—strand within Anglicanism, within mainstream Christianity. That which holds that war is abhorrent, but at times is arguably the least bad option. And that reality has to be confronted and accepted. And that, of course, is distinct from *pacifism*.

JOGTS: Given your work on the relationship between the church and the armed forces, what are the most significant lessons that you have learned in the course of your research? For example, are there any lessons that you hope would become more widely known by not only members of the church and military, but also by elected government officials and citizens more generally?

MS: I think one of the key realisations in looking at this subject, particularly as it has unfolded over more recent decades, is the fact that religious factors are too often readily eliminated or filtered out of our analysis of contemporary complexities. We are locked in a Western paradigm of secularisation: religion is becoming more redundant, more marginal. Therefore, we don't feel we need to think about it and its effects in other contexts.

The idea that religion only began to resurface from 2001 onwards (with 9/11), as a factor in conflicts with which the UK has been involved, is completely spurious. Obviously, it was present very strongly in Bosnia, in Kosovo, in Northern Ireland. It was present in Cyprus. These religious factors have never disappeared, but somehow a secular filter has been applied to the minds of civil servants, politicians, church people, military people—who all refuse to see these factors.

One of the lessons, which is a homegrown lesson, comes across from the experience of British forces in Afghanistan. In the past few years, vigil services, repatriation services, and the need for religion to provide some kind of explanatory framework, some kind of comfort, even for a largely post-Christian generation, has become clear. Religion is still a significant element in sustaining morale and operations. According to surveys, even personnel in Afghanistan who regarded themselves as atheists acknowledged the value of repatriation services, services of remembrance, the presence of chaplains, et cetera. So that's one thing that we can actually use as a take-home in the British context. One, arguably, of many.

One of the interesting pieces of evidence from Afghanistan, which has always intrigued me, was the way in which British officers seeking to engage with civilian leaders found that there was very little opposition if they happened to bring a chaplain with them. In fact, there was a certain amount of interest in having a chaplain present. There was no hostility towards a chaplain. The real hostility lay towards those people who seemed to disavow any kind of belief, because this

represented the ultimate act of profanity, as well as being redolent of the attitude and mindset of the Soviets in the earlier Afghan conflict. So, the idea that advocating that taking no religious position is somehow neutral, and will go down well with everybody, is proven nonsense.

There has to be a far more intelligent appraisal and understanding of the fact that where the West has led, the rest of the world will not necessarily follow—arguably in terms of perspectives on religion, as well. In fact, other non-Western nations will, in many circumstances, positively react against the West. A more complex, nuanced, and full understanding [of] the role of religion as a driving factor within conflicts, as well as a sustaining factor within conflict, must be grasped within the public square. And it's in all sorts of corners, I should say, in the public square.

JOGTS: I want to follow up on your last response. I'm completely fascinated by the way in which religion, and particularly Christianity, was used so easily in the Cold War by the West. Mark Pomar recently wrote a book about the Cold War radio,¹ and he said his last chapter on religion and the way in which the radios used religious broadcasting is the most important chapter of his book, and yet no one has paid any attention to it. This runs parallel to what you're saying. What I find quite paradoxical is that during the Cold War, it was the “atheist Soviets,” and Lenin saying that “religion was the opiate of the masses,” which gave the West such great purchase. And in a sense, the secularisation of that religious rhetoric became both powerful and toxic. Now there seems to be this really interesting switch with Russia and the East using religion to create popular cohesion with Moscow. I was wondering if you could speak about the way in which, during the post-Cold War period, religion has been instrumentalised by those who were pro-atheist, as it were, during the Cold War.

MS: I think there was another statement by Lenin in which he said: religion is like a nail, the harder you hammer it, the deeper it goes. One of the fascinating global developments in terms of the religious landscape over the past thirty years has been the resurgence of religion, or at least religious identity, in the post-communist world.

The Balkan Civil War was ushered in by the collapse of Yugoslavia. In the early nineties, we saw a society, which had been held together by a communist system for nearly fifty years, break apart along old ethnic and religious lines. The ferocity of that conflict was dramatic in a society which had subscribed nominally to an atheistic ideology for decades. The religious aspects of that conflict: the deliberate destruction of your opponent's places of worship (be they churches or mosques), the desecration of cemeteries, the old characterisations, which seemed to spring from a forgotten past, but just basically ran to the fore again in Kosovo in the mid-to-late-nineties. We saw the resurrection of a Serbian nationalism, or the reassertion of a Serbian nationalism, which turned very much on the sacrifice of Saint Lazar, the King of Serbia who died fighting the Turks

¹ Mark G. Pomar, *Cold War Radio: The Russian Broadcasts of the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2022).

at the Battle of Kosovo. These old tropes reasserted themselves with surprising violence and rapidity in the light of the collapse of that system.

In the Soviet Union, with the emergence of the Russian Federation with Russia at the head, who could doubt the power and strength of Russian Orthodoxy as an ethnic identifier? Also, the fact that Putin's mother was ostensibly a believer, and that he has always been a closet believer, despite his links with the KGB. But, in a sense, that exposes some of the anomalies of the communist system. It has often been argued that what defeated Nazi Germany and its allies in the war on the Eastern Front from 1941 to 45 wasn't communism, it was Russian nationalism. The "Great Patriotic War" saw Soviet tanks rumble into Berlin emblazoned with the Orthodox cross, some of which were funded by church collections.

Stalin had basically released the church from the shadows after the intense persecution of the 1930s. Georgy Zhukov, the marshal of the Soviet Union and most important military commander in the Second World War, is now claimed as being a closet believer by his daughter—this fits the narrative of Putin's Russia. Also, the creation (or the building) quite recently of a massive military memorial on the battlefield of Kursk in 1943. In July 1943, I don't know how many Soviet soldiers who died there would've thought they would ever be remembered as heroes of Russian Orthodoxy, particularly as many of them would've been (at least historically) Muslim, or even Buddhist or Jewish. But nonetheless, this is a memory that has been appropriated.

But there was always a certain degree of constancy that Orthodoxy had the power to mobilise Russians, even in the Stalinist era. It's interesting that in a moment of relative peace in the 1960s, with the Soviet Union rebuilding itself and the rollback of the Stalinist legacy, that Khrushchev renews the persecution of religion.

I think the example of the Soviet Union and what Putin is tapping into today has always been a very strong and powerful undercurrent in Russian life. Russian nationalism is heavily inflected and, in fact, defined by a sense of Orthodox distinctiveness. It has served as a very powerful mobilising factor in contemporary conflicts. It's always been there; it's always been a reservoir that even the most unlikely characters could tap.

JOGTS: Maybe we need more studies of Christian Orthodoxy.

MS: You're absolutely right. I think perhaps the Christian tradition which is least understood in the West is Orthodoxy in all its forms, in its national forms. And I think this is one of the problems with the ecumenical movement post-Second World War, and perhaps this is a problem with the ecumenical and interfaith dialogue per se. Concerned people talk to each other, talk to like-minded people, but the question of religious identity, as opposed to theology

as understood in the academy, and understood in clergy circles (we might even say elite circles)—this idea of identity isn't really tapped or engaged with sufficiently.

This question of religion and national identity I came across when I worked for a time on the Troubles in Northern Ireland. I was teaching on this subject. The sense of Protestant identity felt in East Belfast was not the sense of Protestant identity felt by an assembly of more liberal and informed Protestant clergy, be they Presbyterian, Methodist or Church of Ireland. There was something qualitatively different, about that sense of identity and belonging, between clergy and laity.

The identity that's being stirred by Putin at present has little to do with the world of inter-church dialogue. It has an awful lot to do with the sense of "Holy Mother Russia," the distinctiveness of Orthodoxy, the felonious—the suspect—nature of other traditions (be they Catholic or Protestant), the sense of Orthodoxy rooted in a belief of the exceptional quality of Orthodox Russia, and the hostility which other parts (even of the Christian world) have always manifested towards it.

Back to your question: we really do need to understand the more visceral aspects of religion and religious identity on the ground in Russia. It's not adequately studied at present. We have to name the uglier aspects of traditions with which we engage and, indeed, of our own tradition.

JOGTS: And it would seem that the Soviet washing of Russian Christian Orthodoxy during the Cold War led the US not to study it very much at all.

MS: In the US, perhaps more so even than in the UK, the First Amendment and the tendency to try and sidestep religious concerns, and to use [religion] for propaganda purposes, but also treat it in a very ginger sort of fashion, led to this. With Afghanistan, the US State Department tries to reduce everything to a question of economic development and had a reluctance to engage with the particular religious culture, the ecology of that religious culture on the ground. This would require real study and understanding and empathy. In a secular governmental worldview, or the official separation of church and state, where people are being brought up to view the world or trained to see the world through a secular lens, this work is not done. I think this is wholly inadequate to understand the world in which we live, particularly after the Iranian Revolution and the politics of the Muslim world, et cetera.

And obviously, the politics of the Orthodox world has been reset with the rise of Putin. In making the appeal to fellow members of the Russian Orthodox Church, Putin employs his anti-Western rhetoric. He's also tapping into resentment in Serbia at the intervention of NATO in Kosovo, and the bombing of Serbia by NATO. These westerners, again, Putin can argue, are elbowing in and trampling over us and having no sense of our history or identity. Putin weaponised religious questions for the first anniversary of the invasion of Ukraine. The

Archbishop of Canterbury wrote a piece for the Daily Telegraph,² in which he said that Ukraine had to be supported militarily, and that Putin's invasion of Ukraine is an act of great evil.

So, there's been commentary from Anglican circles on Putin, but there's also been commentary from Putin on the Anglicans. Only last week, Putin referred to the divisions in the Anglican community over gay marriage, and the question, as Putin sees it, of a gender-neutral God. He has deployed this rhetoric and deployed this critique to rally conservative support among Christians in the majority world. And of course, one of the other aspects of Putin's religious policy, which we forget, is the way in which he has courted Muslim opinion in Russia, particularly in Chechnya. He sees himself as a religious conservative, and presents himself as a religious conservative who is opposed to innovation as he sees it in the West, behind whom believers in the majority world can rally, whether they are Christian or Muslim. He's played a very shrewd geopolitical religious game. And again, the fact that many of us have scarcely even registered or even recognised that is a reflection of how much we are locked into our own paradigms and locked into our own very limited horizons.

JOGTS: I had never put together Putin's bonding of the Muslim population and beliefs to the Christian. Certainly, in the Cold War, the US attempted to do that as well.

MS: You are right. He's flipped this. Although we are aware of the building of many, many new churches, many of them very grandiose, including a church (a cathedral, as I understand, dedicated to the military)—and this is not just the one in Kursk that I mentioned. He has also built mosques in Moscow, a particularly large one quite recently. Putin is reaching out to constituencies which you said the West played upon during the Cold War era. He understands the geo-strategic value of this; in many respects, Putin has turned the narrative. It's a fascinating subject; it's ominous because for many people in the West, the fact that Putin is courting religious opinion across many parts of the world, across religious divisions, might seem completely incidental to our understanding of the world, but I think that shows just how much we misunderstand the world in which we live, and the direction of global affairs.

JOGTS: Yes, Victor Orbán is using religion too in Hungary.

But I wanted to also go back to the end of World War II. We spoke about nuclear Armageddon. I'm always fascinated by Einstein and his religious beliefs. But what about the Jewish question? How does this fit in? In the US we now see conservative Christians bonding with the hard right and the conservative Jewish population. There was intense antisemitism in the US entering World War II, and then there's the shock of the Holocaust, then almost a double shock of nuclear Armageddon and the Holocaust. Could you discuss that a bit?

² Justin Welby, "Only by supporting Ukraine can we hope to build a lasting peace," *The Daily Telegraph*, February 23, 2023, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/02/23/supporting-ukraine-can-hope-build-lasting-peace/>.

MS: I'm not terribly familiar with the way in which the state of Israel and Jewish identity has played in global affairs. But in the British context, one of the pivotal moments was the history of the creation of the State of Israel. The history was the Balfour Declaration of 1917. The British government of the time tried to rally Jewish opinion across the world behind the Allied War effort. So again, we see the instrumentalisation of religious communities, widely dispersed religious communities—widely diffused, but influential religious communities. And the fact that the 1917 endorsement of a Zionist future for that corner of the world also was related to the recruitment of specifically Jewish units for the British Army. Jews from the United States, and indeed from across other parts of the world, actually joined those who were inspired by a Zionist vision, which the British government at that point seemed to underwrite.

What this feeds into are much bigger geo-strategic questions. One of the factors which made the West so supportive of Israel after independence, or after the creation of Israel, was the fact that the Soviets were really backing many of the Arab nations, such as Egypt under [Gamal Abdel] Nasser, Syria, et cetera. So, it was part of what you might call the Cold War proxy war between the great powers: Moscow and Washington.

JOGTS: I wanted to look at “the universality” of spiritual lives, versus an attachment to a specific religion. What is your understanding of the history of how particular pastors or religious people from a particular church or denomination work with people in warfare? Is there kind of a state of an emergency that brings together a universal spirituality that we can tap into? Or is that a global myth?

MS: It's a very interesting question. If we go back to the phenomenon of ecumenism (particularly in its emergence as an ecumenical movement in the 20th century), although certainly the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910 has been seen as a major staging point in the rise of the ecumenical movement internationally, I would argue that conflict has always had a certain ecumenical dynamic, certainly in terms of my studies of Great Britain and the United States. It is surprising how differences dissipate when somebody else is actually shooting at you. And that ecumenical experience, that interfaith experience, was had by millions of people in Great Britain and the United States in the First World War, in the Second World War, and indeed in previous generations. One of the events in the religious history of Great Britain, which we'll be marking towards the end of this decade, is the bicentenary of the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829, the granting of full political rights to Roman Catholics after centuries of proscription and, basically, second-class status.

There is an Irish nationalist myth, which turns on the idea that this is a result of campaigning by the Catholic Association led by Daniel O'Connell, the first mass movement that used protests and demonstrations in the 1820s. But for several decades prior to emancipation, the British Army had to recruit very heavily among Irish Catholics, because Britain was short of bodies to

fight its wars. And, essentially, if you had an army which by 1830 was approximately 40% composed of Irish Roman Catholics, you had to give a little.

There were military roots that broadened to political society in Great Britain and the growing acceptance of Roman Catholics in British political life and British society. And again, that's an inconvenient narrative for many people because it cuts against an Irish nationalist narrative. It sees religious toleration as rooted in conflict, which is an awkward equation. But if you look forward to the First World War in Great Britain, and you look at the way in which chaplains of all traditions cooperated... I'm not trying to paint a rosy picture: there were tensions; there were conflicts. But nonetheless, the idea of rubbing along together, because also the military authorities required you to, that's an important incentive in and of itself. But the other fact—you mentioned the American case—is, with the Second World War, the celebration of the fruition, the flowering and the flourishing of “Tri-Faith America,” in the context of the US armed forces. This is the idea that Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, to use that tripartite division, popularised in the 1950s, could serve together in huge numbers to combat a common enemy—Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan—could suffer together and could actually see just how relatively small their differences were on certain levels. They did not show the narcissism of minor differences.

You discovered the fact that you had far more in common with the people next to you than you had appreciated in civilian life, which was often polarised in religious terms. You were being looked after according to practice in the US Army and Navy by a chaplain of a completely different tradition. He was your chaplain, and you would likely form some kind of rapport with him.³ That practical ecumenism has been underplayed in the history of the ecumenical movement. Rooted in conflict at the grassroots level is something which is uncomfortable for the history of that movement, but I think it's something which should be recognised.

JOGTS: Turning specifically to your book *God and Uncle Sam*,⁴ you argue vehemently against standard separation of church and state tropes. Would you expand on that?

MS: One of the key things about the separation of church and state, the idea of the First Amendment, is that it has often been more notional than real. We saw in the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt, who was an Episcopalian brought up in a world of Anglophilia, that there was an English influence on American Episcopalianism, which was reflected in the attitudes and outlook of Roosevelt himself. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Episcopal Church was seeking to be the first among America's churches. The building of the Episcopal Washington Cathedral with the support of Congress is a slightly odd phenomenon if you follow the First

³ Professor Snape added that he used the term “he” advisedly because of the all-male chaplaincy service.

⁴ Michael Snape, *God and Uncle Sam: Religion and America's Armed Forces in World War II* (Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2015).

Amendment. That kind of blurring of the lines is very common among American Episcopalians of Roosevelt's generation.

Roosevelt as president and Commander in Chief was very keen on further blurring these lines by the massive provision for religion through the US armed forces. The administration built hundreds of chapels, purpose-built chapels, which had never existed before for the US military; distributed Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish scripture to GIs, et cetera; offered a super abundance of chaplains provided by the US military for the care of its soldiers, for its care of its men and women. And again, one of the people who was complicit in this was General George C. Marshall, another Episcopalian. So essentially, you had particular individuals in powerful positions who were brought up in a particular religion with a particular view of the way in which the state should relate to the church.

And there's more of a Church of England colouring to Episcopalianism at this time, a kind of quasi establishment feeling, which does affect military policy. There was a Cadet Chapel at the Naval Academy at Annapolis and a Cadet Chapel at West Point, until the middle years of the 20th century, which was very Episcopalian. In fact, there was a bit of an Episcopalian stranglehold on the chaplaincy at West Point. In the 1960s, Morris Janowitz undertook a very interesting survey whereby he established that 50% of America's generals and admirals since 1890 were Episcopalians, and yet Episcopalians represented only 1% or 2% of the US population.⁵ So, when writing *God and Uncle Sam*, I was fascinated by how much a particular church with its ethos and traditions had infiltrated the American military and government establishment, and how people of that Episcopalian background were able to shape policy in a society in which, constitutionally, church and state were meant to be separate. American secularist groups that challenged this in the 1940s got absolutely nowhere because the nation was at war. Millions of men and women were overseas, hundreds of thousands dying. It wasn't the time to have this kind of conversation.

It's a fascinating picture. I think had Roosevelt not been Episcopalian, had he not been so pro-British—he was even accused of speaking with an affected English accent—[America's] war entry would have been different. France was defeated in 1940, and Britain stood alone, and Lend-Lease was a hot-button issue in the United States. Roosevelt was personally committed to supporting Great Britain as a Christian democracy and also, historically, a predominantly Anglican country. I think that that factored into his considerations.

If you look at the Placentia Bay meeting of August 1941, when Churchill met Roosevelt on the deck of the battleship HMS *Prince of Wales*, in the famous footage of them they're actually attending a naval service at which British sailors and American sailors and Marines are present.⁶

⁵ Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait* (New York: The Free Press, 1960).

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DqfHbu6o7HU>

It's an Anglican service presided over by a New Zealand chaplain. They sing, "Oh God, Our Help in Ages Past". From an Anglican stable, they sing, "Onward Christian Soldiers," and basically, they represent to the world—this is for world consumption—a sense of democratic and Christian solidarity, but also one which is very subtly and very significantly Anglican.

JOGTS: That's fascinating. This also involved the elites of the US and the financiers, philanthropists.

MS: Absolutely, and JP Morgan and all of this sort of thing. The shadow establishment, if you will, of Episcopalianism in early 20th century America was strong. I don't think that's really been engaged with by religious historians to the extent that it might be.

JOGTS: In terms of your writing and your research, you've got such an incredible command of sources and access to documents and people, and what they've said. Can you talk about your use of archives and sources and the differences between the US and the UK sources?

MS: Sources? That's a very interesting question. One of the things I've discovered during COVID, but was aware of before then, is how much better libraries and archives in the United States are, as a rule, in terms of making their collections available. Far more in the US had been digitised. The Imperial War Museum [in the UK], which I think is one of the prime archives on the study of conflict and war, has quite a lot of religious content in its collections. It's making a determined effort to digitise its collections, but it's not gone quite as far as the United States or Australia. I think the larger the country, the more scattered your potential users are, and perhaps the greater the perceived need to make that material available. We're very London-centric in Britain, and certainly the idea that you just have to jump on a train and go down and look at the London archives, that's only slowly shifting.

I was brought up in the school of the social history of religion. To a certain extent, British collections—not only the Imperial War Museum collections, but also the Liddle Collection [at the University of Leeds]—seem to be more geared towards that approach to history than the American collections are. In Britain, there was—I think—an earlier push to democratise the history of these conflicts and to make those sources available. That's my impression. I didn't come across an archive like the Imperial War Museum, which had literally the materials of thousands and thousands of people from all sorts of backgrounds, so readily accessible in a US context.

JOGTS: It goes right to E.P. Thompson, social history, and questions of where people put things.

MS: Absolutely. And how things are catalogued, as well. Anybody who's considering writing about chaplaincy (and obviously it does feature in the history of the religious experience in the military!) will find that the National Archives in the United States have done a much better job at concentrating chaplaincy records than have the British. To write a history of the [British] Royal

Air Force or Royal Naval chaplaincy is extremely difficult because the materials are scattered, when indeed they even exist. In actual fact, assembling and mapping and identifying the sources even for Army chaplaincy in the UK has been a bit of a jigsaw puzzle. And we know a lot more about where these sources lie now than we did twenty years ago, because there seemed to be a void, to be quite honest. Whereas if you went to the National Archives in College Park, Maryland [NARA II], you'll get the chaplain records for the US in bulk: metres and metres and metres and metres of the stuff. And so, I think that's another contrast: in terms of the retention of official records, institutional records on that level, I think the US is better than the UK. So, it's an odd picture of convergence and divergence in that regard.

JOGTS: I'll just ask the final question, which is, what have we missed? What would you like to say?

MS: Maybe something more about memorialisation, the subject area with which others and I have been engaged for more than twenty years now. The topic has had to struggle to find recognition, although it's an elephant in the room. Although the religious dimensions of conflict are perennial and almost universal—whether it's the sixteenth century or whether it's the early-twenty-first century—you'll find this material, you'll find its significance.

If you go into not only major Anglican or Church of Scotland churches in England and Scotland, or Church of Ireland churches in Ireland, you'll find so many of them have many military memorials. The major churches will have military chapels. But this aspect of these faith communities' history, their traditions, their formative influence... despite the fact that they are so visible, so obvious, they are so little studied. They're considered incidental details; they're pushed to one side. Their study would help faith communities to really understand the significance and the formative influence of conflict in their history. I think it's worthwhile. There's so much to be engaged with. And I think also one has to avoid what one great historian said about the great condescension we can show to our past. It's very easy, particularly in the study of the history of conflict and the churches to point a finger at certain individuals and say, "You made a wrong call then," as it were. But I've never been convinced that we're necessarily more enlightened when it comes to judging our contemporary situation than those individuals in the First World War and Second World War. Posterity, I think—I'm sure—will point an accusatory finger at us. We need to be a little more humble in viewing our subjects and understanding the situations that they were placed in.

JOGTS: Thank you very much.