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G.I. Messiahs: Soldiering, War, and American Civil Religion. By **Jonathan H. Ebel.** New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2015. xi + 241 pp. \$40.00 cloth; \$19.99 Kindle.

When politicians pronounce America a Christian nation, they often receive flak. “Judeo-Christian” they’re told, is the proper term for such a civic religious statement. Jonathan H. Ebel is not interested in “Judeo-Christian.” In his book, *G.I. Messiahs: Soldiering, War, and American Civil Religion*, he contends that soldiers make the Word flesh and that the civil religion erected on their bodies is explicitly Christian. Ebel argues that Americans view soldiers as saviors as understood by Christian theology, providing the nation with “generally intelligible conceptual language” not only to interpret soldiering but also to succor the “emotional and theological core of American civil religion” (8). He analogizes between God as the American nation and his Son as American soldiers.

Ebel builds his analysis upon specific case studies that exemplify key elements of his argument. The first half of the book focuses largely on World War I, the subject of his previous book, before pivoting to the military crisis of Vietnam and the subsequent impact of a volunteer military on United States’ wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He chooses to juxtapose diverse sources—a Christmas sermon with a Memorial Day march that ended in bloodshed, creation of the tomb of the Unknown Soldier with the military career and suicide of Medal of Honor recipient Charles Whittlesey, movies on World War II with Gary Powers’s ordeal as a captured U-2 pilot. These juxtapositions resemble coins that are flipped: one side articulates powerfully a vision of soldiers as Christian saviors redeeming the American nation and the other side questions the persuasiveness of such a salvific narrative. Still, in the end, Ebel affirms his contention that American soldiers make the Word flesh and sustain America’s civil religious belief irrespective of what they may think, say, and do.

Ebel’s ambitious aim to extend discussion of American civil religion beyond texts to symbols, and especially to soldiers’ bodies, drives much of the book. He is most convincing when he discusses dead soldiers, unable to offer their own versions of war, killing, and death. His chapter on the establishment of military cemeteries in Europe, initially after World War I and then expanded after World War II, elegantly and effectively makes his case. Here he brings his insights to bear on political and institutional activities surrounding the creation of the American Battle Monuments Commission together with thoughtful analysis of the physical architecture of these cemeteries. The chapter provides a brilliant example of religious studies methodologies. Yet one can’t help questioning why Melvin Rosenbaum and Samuel H. J. Cohen, clearly Jewish names of that era, are buried under crosses in the cemetery at Normandy and not under Stars of David. Given this provocative

example, Ebel might have pushed harder to explore the colonizing power of Christianizing civil religion in the military, and to question some of its personal and political costs.

As a historian of American Jews I could not help wondering if more engagement with the nominal “Judeo-Christian tradition” might have enriched and complicated Ebel’s argument. After all, many of the men behind the films discussed were Jews, who chose to present the “Good War” in Christian terminology to movie audiences. What conditioned their choices, and what does knowing who made the films add to our understanding of the process of creating a vision of G.I.s as Christian messiahs? By contrast, I was struck with how Louis Iselin’s sculpture *Remembrance*, installed at a chapel in the Suresnes American Cemetery, could have been assimilated to Jewish religious injunctions to remember the dead, overlooking any Christian dimensions.

Despite these caveats, *G.I. Messiahs* significantly expands and invigorates discussion of civil religion in America, demonstrating its remarkable depth and breadth across much of the twentieth century. Robert Bellah may have first called scholars’ attention to it in the mid-1960s, but Ebel demonstrates that civil religion was flourishing many decades prior. Simultaneously, *G.I. Messiahs* contributes to a growing literature on the religious dimensions of war, especially the experiences of soldiers and how their embodied suffering, valor, and death is interpreted by those who remain alive, often far from the battlefields. Ebel’s bold premise that war is ritual challenges those religious studies scholars who, focusing on peace, emphasize the killing dimension of war.

In the last section of the book, Ebel looks at what he calls “the Christological crisis” of Vietnam, describing what he labels “voluntarist” and “adoptionist” Christologies (156). The former envisioned soldiering as embraced willingly, the latter saw military service as coerced. Conflict in the United States between articulate representatives of these positions, with the latter often opposing the war in Vietnam as a betrayal of civil religious principles, ultimately produced an all-volunteer military. In many ways, this new military formation reinvigorated the Christian ideal, although Ebel’s concluding chapter on soldier as scapegoat directly addresses disturbing dimensions of *G. I. Messiahs*.

Throughout the book, Ebel invites readers to engage with his interpretations and to argue with him. His lively prose makes his provocative interpretations accessible. I hope that many readers will take up his offer to debate. At stake are vital issues relating to religion, military service, and how Americans understand themselves and their place in the world.

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