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Anglican army chaplains' responses to prostitution on the Western Front, 1914–1919

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ABSTRACT

Anglican Army chaplains' responses to prostitution in the First World War remain a neglected subject. Typically, historians have used references to prostitution in chaplains' diaries and memoirs as anecdotes to illustrate moral tensions with military authorities. However, this approach implies a consistent moral condemnation throughout the conflict, contradicting recent research which emphasizes that chaplains adapted to their military environment and changed their perspectives. This article moves beyond the prevailing use of isolated anecdotes by situating chaplains' responses to prostitution within military and social contexts. Rather than a static moralist position, it argues that chaplains' responses to prostitution shifted throughout the conflict. While early responses were characterized largely by interventionist moral objections, from 1915 onwards these moral objections were accompanied by pragmatic assessments and criticisms of regulated prostitution. By adopting a chronological approach, and contrasting civilian and military chaplains approaches to the subject, this study argues that chaplains' responses to regulated prostitution provide another means of showing how the military environment affected chaplains' moral stances.

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Introduction

In 1919, Robert Keable, one of 1,941 Anglican army chaplains who served in the First World War, composed a record of his war service. Determined to produce a candid portrayal of life on the Western Front, Keable included a chapter on a controversial feature of the British Army: prostitution, or as he referred to it: 'Street Girls'.¹ Although Keable noted his discomfort at French and Belgian women engaging in sex work, apparent in his admission that 'they make me feel hotly indignant, rather tender, and very pitiful', he praised their character.² He stressed how female sex workers' humanity, capacity for tenderness, sacrifice and bravery led him to comprehend 'that the eyes of Christ must have held something very different from disgust and horror as He looked upon the street girls of His day'.³ Alongside this conflicted stance, Keable empathized with soldiers who solicited female sex workers: 'It is all very well to read the Ten Commandments and preach them . . . but the padre who cannot see the attraction, and sympathise, seems to be an incredible creature'.⁴ However, beyond framing these

encounters as a fleeting source of entertainment, Keable presented these sexual encounters as an essential nourishment for soldiers: 'even men who can live unselfishly and die heroically find a craving here as great as the craving for food and refreshment'.⁵ While his professed understanding may have stemmed from his affair with eighteen-year-old nurse Grace Eileen Joly Beresford Buck, his empathy was not an isolated example in the Anglican branch of the Army Chaplains Department [AChD] during the First World War. In 1970, former army chaplain Bishop Frank Russell Barry wrote that, as chaplains adjusted to the military environment, they realized the futility of expecting soldiers to adhere to assumed sexual moral norms:

At first we were worried about the superficial things like their bawdy language and their womanising. (What else did we expect was likely to happen when men, separated from their wives and in the highest condition of physical vigour, were subjected to intense sex-simulation by violence and killing?) But we soon realised that these were superficial.⁶

The sympathy and moral relativism expressed by Keable and Barry illustrates the importance of recent scholarship emphasizing the complexity of sexual politics during the First World War. Reviewing the established scholarship of the field, Laura Doan notes that historians typically frame the contemporary debate on venereal disease [VD] and prostitution as an ideological battle between 'modernizers' and 'moralists'.⁷ In this seductive framework, 'modernizers', usually medical and military authorities, doggedly champion the practical advantages of regulated prostitution and preventatives to curb VD and maintain morale. In contrast, 'moralists', typically military chaplains, domestic social purity groups, and religious agencies such as the YMCA or Church Army, unanimously condemn the immorality of these practices.⁸



Figure 1. Chaplains holding a church parade before going into the trenches on 29 July 1916. © IWM (Q 4069).



Figure 2. Photograph of Bishop Llewelyn Gwynne. By kind permission of the Trustees of the Museum of Army Chaplaincy, from the author's personal collection.



Figure 3. Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy (centre), receiving his MC with his family, 1918. © IWM (HU 118747).

Since the mid-1990s, historians such as Cherry, Doan, Harrison and Makepeace have challenged the credibility of this binary approach. Noting that military and medical officials often held conflicted views over the effectiveness and morality of prostitution and preventatives, scholars have explored the fallacy of ascribing a sense of cohesion to 'modernizers'.⁹ Yet despite highlighting the complexity of the 'modernizer' camp, this scrutiny has not been applied to 'moralists'. When contradictions in the 'moralist' stance

are raised, they are often treated merely as amusing anomalies.¹⁰ This approach excludes ‘moralists’ from engaging with the pragmatic components of the debate, rendering them passive, and ultimately deferential, figures. Although by no means bearing the sole responsibility, historians researching the AChD during the First World War have played a significant role in sustaining this interpretation. Since the mid-2000s, the field has made a concerted effort to move away from redemptive narratives and examine chaplains’ service in their military and social contexts.¹¹ This approach considers how chaplains adapted to their military environment and recognized the need to soften religious instruction and appreciate the military rationale of policies such as court martials.¹² These studies stress that chaplains’ belief systems were challenged by the conflict, influencing subsequent ecclesiastical controversies that affected the Anglican Church and wider society in the Interwar period.¹³ Yet despite the popularity of this revisionist approach, chaplains’ attitudes to prostitution and VD remain a neglected topic. When historians of the AChD have considered how chaplains responded to VD, brief anecdotes present chaplains as unilaterally ‘demanding purity and self-restraint’, albeit differing in adopting conciliatory or combative approaches.¹⁴ This portrayal of chaplains imposes a fixed moral stance throughout the conflict, a point that contradicts recent research,¹⁵ whilst also denying chaplains the capability of engaging with the subject in a pragmatic manner.

In contrast to analyses which limit chaplains to a static ‘moralist’ position, this article will argue that Anglican army chaplains developed and expressed a blend of pragmatic and moral arguments against regulated prostitution and VD during the First World War. To support this argument, the article will employ a broadly chronological analysis to illustrate the changing considerations from 1914 up to the start of the Inter-War period. Initially, chaplains’ attitudes to regulated prostitution were typified by moral condemnations of soldiers’ sexual activities. After late 1915, chaplains tempered moral unease with a recognition that some soldiers treated sexual intercourse as a form of escapism.¹⁶ By late 1916, in response to the military officials’ inability to curb VD rates in the army, chaplains at senior and lower levels increasingly challenged the efficiency of regulated prostitution. As chaplains cited the negative effect on morale and high casualty rates, they exploited the reasoning espoused by military and medical authorities with criticisms blending underlying moral qualms with practical considerations.

However, the central question of why chaplains’ criticisms of prostitution shifted cannot be reduced to a straightforward, singular causation. As studies of chaplains in the First World War attest, there was no unilateral experience of the conflict. The story of each chaplain reveals how their individual military service raised questions about class prejudices, morality, humanity, and God. Nevertheless, despite the diverse range of experiences, all military chaplains shared a common factor throughout the conflict: the administration of the AChD. The organization of the AChD features consistently in chaplaincy studies, with Peter Howson emphasizing the importance of structural upheaval in 1915 for understanding changes to chaplains’ role.¹⁷ During the early years of the war, Anglican chaplains often complained about logistical chaos and a lack of official guidance.¹⁸ Following the reorganization in 1915, a clear hierarchy and system of accountability in each branch was established that allowed senior Anglican chaplains to operate more recognizably as a military body.¹⁹ Instructional courses for chaplains

grounded their role explicitly within military responsibilities,²⁰ while Assistant Chaplains General [A.C.G.] conferences and committees organized by senior chaplains helped determine policies relevant to emerging military issues.²¹

However, as acknowledged by Howson, it is important not to overstate the influence that senior Anglican chaplains held over lower ranking chaplains. Despite acting within a more efficient administration, the nature of army chaplaincy still required a degree of initiative on the part of padres. This meant that chaplains' reactions to soldiers' behaviour and interpretations of policies were subject to personal interpretation and specific circumstances. Furthermore, there is a lack of explicit evidence that chaplains received instructions from A.C.G. conferences regarding VD and prostitution. As a result, it is difficult to argue convincingly that the similarities between the responses of senior and lower ranking Anglican chaplains indicate an adherence to senior policies. Instead, examining the responses of senior and lower ranking chaplains to regulated prostitution separately allows for these similarities to be considered as a consequence of the complex balance between pragmatic military responsibilities and pastoral spiritual care.

Before undertaking this analysis, it is necessary to acknowledge its limitations. While the diaries and memoirs of chaplains provide fascinating insights, the selected responses raise questions of representativeness. For almost all chaplains, regulated prostitution was omitted explicitly from their writings, whether out of personal aversion or to defend the reputation of British soldiers.²² Those who did engage with the matter rarely produced identical assessments of the policy or its perceived appeal to soldiers. As such, it is important to treat the selected sources as one example of the tension between chaplains' military and spiritual responsibilities. It is also important to note that British Non-Anglican chaplains, in particular Catholic chaplains, also articulated a complex interplay between moral and practical considerations when responding to VD and prostitution.²³ For example, diary entries from lower ranking chaplains such as Canon F. H. Drinkwater, Reverend George Griffin, and the range of responses recorded in *Catholic Soldiers* on sexual promiscuity, indicate that Catholic chaplains empathized with the escapist function of sexual intercourse and critically evaluated the pragmatic reasoning underlying regulated prostitution.²⁴ These sources merit their own systematic study that the scope of this article unfortunately cannot accommodate.

Prostitution and the British Army, c. 1800–1919

In the century prior to the First World War, the British Army developed an ambiguous and controversial stance to regulated prostitution. After the Napoleonic Wars, heterosexual intercourse was incorporated more formally into the military reward structure on the rationale that sexual intercourse was a fundamental need for the morale of the rank and file.²⁵ Though not officially encouraged, military authorities ensured that, where possible, soldiers had access to medically regulated brothels. These measures were believed to minimize the risk of VD and prevent homosexual urges amongst soldiers, perennial fears for military authorities throughout the nineteenth- and early-twentieth centuries.²⁶ While regulated prostitution stood in stark contrast to dominant civilian moral norms, throughout the first half of the nineteenth-century the general consensus in Britain felt that it was best to turn a blind eye to the uncomfortable reality. Indeed, a grudging acceptance that soldiers would solicit sexual intercourse is

discernible in the advice that Reverend G.R. Gleig, then the seasoned Chaplain-General of the Forces, wrote for prospective military chaplains in 1857 transitioning from civilian to military life: '[a military chaplain] has to deal either with young men taken almost exclusively from the humblest classes of society, or with gentlemen full of animal spirits, and accustomed to put but slight control on their passions and impulses'.²⁷

However, the enactment of the Contagious Diseases Acts (1864, 1866 and 1869) marked a controversial imposition of military attitudes to sexual intercourse onto the British public.²⁸ Under the terms of the Acts, women discovered near a military barracks could be stopped and forced to subject themselves to medical examination for VD. The rationale of the legislation rested on the apparent need to minimize VD rates in the Army among unmarried men by regulating who could access British soldiers. This measure confronted the British public with military pragmatism divorced from civilian sensibilities. Although the Acts were eventually repealed in Britain and India, in 1886 and 1888 respectively, on the grounds that they encouraged perceived male sexual immorality, the military continued to use regulated prostitution in India on a semi-official basis. However, despite persevering with the policy, military authorities did not ignore the public moral outrage at the practice.²⁹ Alternative activities such as regimental sport were promoted as preferable means for soldiers to alleviate boredom. Military authorities also attempted to dissuade soldiers from indulging in sexual activities with harsh punitive measures for those who contracted VD, including the docking of pay and relatives being informed.

At the outbreak of the First World War, this uneasy relationship between pragmatism and moral discomfort in military sexual policy emerged in the contradictory guidelines that soldiers faced. Upon enlistment in 1914, recruits were advised by Lord Kitchener that 'while treating all women with perfect courtesy, you should avoid intimacy'.³⁰ In practice, however, the army saw an apparent inevitability that soldiers would solicit sexual relations and pursued a more lenient approach. Punishments were mainly levied onto those who contracted sexually transmitted diseases rather than on those who solicited women. The instruction, repeated every three months, that those who contracted VD should immediately report themselves to medical officials, indicates that military authorities believed this was likely to be a regular occurrence.³¹ Perhaps the greatest indication that senior military personnel were resigned to soldiers soliciting heterosexual intercourse was the swift incorporation of French regulated brothels, known as *maison tolérées*, into British military culture. With women requiring passes and frequent medical inspection to work in the houses, *maison tolérées* were presented as an opportunity to minimize VD rates. Yet despite this tacit endorsement, harsh punishments were imposed on those who abused the liberty or caught VD. For example, in March 1915, the Army Provost Marshal in Rouen recorded the names of officers deemed to have tarnished the King's name by openly conversing with prostitutes in a local hotel.³²

The tacit permittance of sexual indulgence by British military authorities meant that regulated prostitution became a familiar, though divisive, feature of life on the Western Front. Although not pursued by all, commercialized sexual intercourse, or at least the opportunity for it, was regularly alluded to in soldiers' diaries and memoirs.³³ In January 1917, signaller S.T. Eachus noted how 'Walking down the principal streets of Amiens, I

was astonished at the large number of prostitutes. In fact, nearly all the women and young girls appeared to be in the streets for no other purpose'.³⁴ The steady rise in VD admissions throughout the war attests to a consistent appetite for sexual intercourse amongst the British soldiery.³⁵ In 1915, 17,525 soldiers were admitted to hospital as a result of VD; by 1916, this rose to 24,108, doubling in 1917, before reaching 60,099 in 1918.³⁶ Though ultimately hopeful that soldiers could remain abstinent, pragmatism overrode any moral qualms that British Army officials may have held towards regulated prostitution. Similar to sport, musical entertainment and alcohol, sexual intercourse was seen as another means of maintaining morale for military effectiveness.

The responses of Early Anglican chaplains and the re-organization of the AChD, 1914 to 1915

When British Army chaplains first arrived on the continent in 1914, they received minimal advice on how to adjust to the liminal moral environment characterized by pragmatic relativism. The AChD relied on volunteer clergymen to train selected chaplains, who imparted basic guidelines on their duties and difficulties they might face. However, the majority of volunteers – trainers and trainees – had no previous military experience, and those that did rarely saw active service. The only explicit guidance chaplains received from military authorities was the *King's Regulations* issued on enlistment, but this contained sparse advice for chaplains beyond a basic outline of their responsibilities.³⁷ In light of these vague instructions, many chaplains reverted to their civilian Christian teachings to minister in the unfamiliar environment.³⁸ Although underpinned by good intentions, the application of civilian Christian moral standards to the military context meant chaplains often alienated themselves from soldiers. Condemnations of pastimes such as drinking or gambling disregarded their escapist value for soldiers, exacerbating the unease soldiers regularly felt around chaplains.³⁹

Chaplains' responses to prostitution in the early years of the conflict were another manifestation of this tension between civilian moral attitudes and military culture. Chaplains often pursued an interventionist approach and overtly condemned soldiers for their apparent sinfulness. Between 1914 and 1915, Oswin Creighton, having heard rumours 'of soldiers leaving their billets at the late hours to meet girls in back streets', patrolled the streets of Nuneaton to deter soldiers with threats of military sanctions.⁴⁰ Although Reverend Philip 'Tubby' Clayton denied that British soldiers solicited prostitution in his memoir, the establishment of the Christian men's club 'Talbot House' in Poperinghe, a renown centre of sexual opportunity, in 1915 was most likely intended, in part, to prevent soldiers soliciting sex workers.⁴¹ These moralistic efforts often irritated military officials because they forced authorities to enact impractical punitive measures. In an interview for the Imperial War Museum oral history project, Sergeant George Ashurst recalled how, while sitting in an *estaminet* simultaneously functioning as an unofficial brothel in April 1915, the battalion's padre entered bellowing 'Have none of you mothers? Have none of you sisters?' before reporting them to the colonel.⁴² Upon hearing this, the colonel decided to reduce soldiers' recreation time in the town, an impractical measure that irritated soldiers and disrupted the tacit system in place. The episode captured the early tensions between chaplains' civilian moral standards and the more pragmatic, relativist stance maintained by military authorities.

The reorganization of the AChD in 1915, first with the appointment of Bishop Llewellyn Gwynne as Deputy Chaplain General [D.C.G.] of the Anglican branch, and later the formal split of the Department into two branches with clearer hierarchies, led to significant changes in Anglican chaplaincy by 1916. The new administration sought to move chaplains away from provocative religious judgements to a more pragmatic, dynamic military role. Soon after his appointment as D.C.G., Gwynne sent a dozen chaplains back to England in 1915 for incompatible preaching.⁴³ Addressing a group of sixty chaplains at an interdenominational conference in 1916, Reverend Harry Blackburne stressed that chaplains should focus on uplifting soldiers rather than pronouncing moral censure, stating ‘it is our duty not to wail about the past, but to be cheerful with an optimism that Christ alone can give’.⁴⁴ From 1916 onwards, chaplains appear to make concerted efforts to avoid condemning soldiers. Recalling his brief service in 1916, Norman Demuth, serving as an underage rifleman in the 5th London Regiment, noted that ‘They [the padres] never ranted, they never told you what a sinner you were or anything like that, and if they said a prayer it was a very short one’.⁴⁵ In February 1918, Reverend C. Bell wrote to his brother preparing to join him in the army chaplaincy and stressed the importance of how religious instruction was conveyed: ‘As you say, preaching in the army is difficult. The great thing is, I think, to say something that will help the average man and also instruct him’.⁴⁶ Whilst maintaining religious responsibilities, chaplains were encouraged to recognize and respect the rationale of their military environment and adjust their responses accordingly.

Bishop Gwynne and senior Anglican chaplains to regulated prostitution, 1915 – 1919

Although the reorganization of the AChD allowed senior Anglican chaplains to discuss military matters through internal and inter-denominational conferences, until November 1916 regulated prostitution did not feature in official discussions.⁴⁷ However, the glaring ineffectiveness of regulated prostitution, shown by rising VD rates, spurred Gwynne into action. On 10 November 1916, Gwynne wrote to his Assistant Chaplain Generals. In the letter, he called attention to ‘the widespread havoc that is being caused by immorality in the army both among officers + men’, and asked them to consider what steps could be adopted to address the issue.⁴⁸ Although Gwynne and his senior chaplains evidently held moral reservations towards regulated prostitution by referring to it as ‘immorality’, the ensuing Sixth A.C.G. conference on 28 and 29 November 1916 was characterized by an approach informed by both pragmatism and moral concerns. The long discussion kept off the record ‘concluded that two things were desirable’ to curb ‘immorality’.⁴⁹ First, ‘That instructions + advice should be given to all chaplains, especially at the Bases, on how to deal with the problem’; second, that there should be ‘A pronouncement from some military authority on the subject’.⁵⁰ Significantly, these two objectives framed prostitution and VD as military issues that chaplains should critique rather than solely moral matters. The aim to elicit a pronouncement from military authorities also shows a desire to ground the criticism in an official process. By eliciting an official stance on the negative effects of regulated prostitution, senior chaplains could then respond to the explicit rationale that underpinned the policy.

With these aims in mind, the senior chaplains agreed that the following action should be taken:

- (i) Rev. G. Gordon would draw up a report for submission to army commanders, + eventually to C in E
- (ii) C of E chaplains should be encouraged to co-operate with Non-conformist chaplains + with select medical officers;
- (iii) A point to be noted was that licensed houses minister to lust.⁵¹

While the final point shows that senior chaplains maintained moral aversion to regulated prostitution, the preceding points indicate a commitment to treat prostitution in a practical manner. Although the content of the report is unknown, the process of submitting a report demonstrated to military authorities that senior chaplains could engage with the topic beyond visceral moral outrage. Evidence that this report may have emphasized the ineffectiveness of regulated prostitution can be inferred from the second instruction. By encouraging Anglican chaplains to co-operate with selected medical officers, it is likely that senior Anglican chaplains hoped chaplains would gain a practical understanding of VD from cooperative sources. This instruction suggests a concerted effort to ensure chaplains grounded their moral objections within persuasive and useful military advice. The desire for Anglican chaplains to consider VD and regulated prostitution in a pragmatic military capacity can also be inferred from the instruction to cooperate with non-conformist chaplains. By disregarding denominational divisions, senior Anglican chaplains restricted religion to a secondary position, advocating an approach that blended moral qualms with more persuasive pragmatic arguments.

After the sixth A.C.G. conference, senior Anglican chaplains continued to emphasize the apparent ineffectiveness of regulated prostitution whilst avoiding overt moral condemnations. On 28 December 1916, Gwynne wrote to the Adjutant General Lieutenant-General, Sir Nevil Macready, about the worrying rise of VD rates in the British Army. However, rather than stressing the supposed immorality of regulated prostitution, Gwynne offered practical solutions that implicitly highlighted the flaws of the policy. He began the letter by remarking that ‘The impression [is] that this form of self indulgence [sic] is almost approved in the army and be best counteracted by a G.R.O. [General Routine Order] on the subject followed by more drastic penalization of officers or men incapacitated by Venereal Disease’.⁵² Gwynne even offered a draft of the proposed G.R.O. to Macready:

The C-in-C views with regret the number of patients needing treatment in Venereal Hospitals. In view of the fact that they are not only costing the country sums in Hospital, but through their own fault, are out of action + unable to do the work for which they are paid; in future all pay will be stopped during the period of treatment in Hospital.⁵³

These suggestions directly criticized the pragmatic reasoning that underpinned regulated prostitution. By outlining the cost to the nation, as well as the detrimental effects on military strength, Gwynne grounded his underlying moral objections in practical justifications advocated by military authorities. Gwynne emphasized his blend of pragmatic and moral considerations by concluding that ‘V.D is at the present time reducing the

actual material force of the army, as well as its moral and spiritual power'.⁵⁴ His assertion that regulated prostitution had a tangibly negative impact on military strength reflected a concerted effort to place his moral objections within a pragmatic framework relevant to military officials.

Subsequent A.C.G. discussions on VD and prostitution indicate that senior Anglican chaplains continued to downplay their moral qualms in favour of practical considerations. During a debate on 'immorality' at the Eighth A.C.G. conference on 20 and 21 February 1917, the A.C.G. of the Fifth Army suggested 'that there was great need for a simple statement by leading medical authorities, backed by the C. in. C., on the subject of chastity + health [which was] met with general approval'.⁵⁵ The acknowledgement that medical and military officials needed to support abstinence as a viable alternative for it to be implemented indicates that senior chaplains recognized that moral objections would only be persuasive if they appealed to utilitarian military thought.

A similar recognition was expressed at the twelfth A.C.G. conference on 23 and 24 January 1918 following a meeting between Gwynne and General John Pershing, commander of the American forces, on 7 January 1918.⁵⁶ Following this conversation, Gwynne informed the senior chaplains of 'the methods of combatting this [venereal] disease [that] could be obtained in the American army'.⁵⁷ These methods included stressing to 'the men that it was natural + manly to keep pure; weak + effeminate to yield to temptation. Brothels were picketed, e.g. at St Nazaire, notwithstanding the protests of the authorities'.⁵⁸ Gwynne then stated that he would 'try + see the new Director of Medical Services when next in England to endeavour to get some such system adopted for the British Forces', adding 'Copies of the American leaflet on the subject would be applied for + if obtainable, distributed'.⁵⁹ Perhaps in recognition that the American system relied on potentially controversial moralistic ideas, Gwynne justified the interventionist approach by citing its efficiency: 'He [Gwynne] stated that cases of V.D. were only 7/10 of 1% of the American Army'.⁶⁰ This assertion reflected and manifested the complex interplay between moral and military considerations that characterized senior chaplains' discussions on VD and prostitution. Although senior chaplains retained moral aversions to *maison tolérées*, they downplayed their moral qualms in favour of pragmatic critiques to make their objections more persuasive to military and medical authorities.

Lower ranking chaplains' responses to prostitution, 1916–1919

As A.C.G. conferences approached sexual 'immorality' with pragmatic considerations, from 1916 onwards lower ranking chaplains also voiced an interplay between moral qualms and policy criticisms. Distanced from explicitly bureaucratic responsibilities, their pastoral role required a delicate balance between providing spiritual care and upholding soldiers' morale. Lower ranking chaplains' responses to regulated prostitution reflected this challenging consideration. The selected diaries, sermons and memoirs show chaplains framing their moral disapproval within critical assessments of the policy's efficacy. Subsequently, although lower ranking chaplains considered regulated prostitution a serious moral issue, they restrained these beliefs to make their criticisms more relatable and convincing to military audiences.

When chaplains sought to dissuade soldiers from *maison tolérées*, they avoided blaming their audiences by emphasizing how the policy harmed their wellbeing. In his 1928 memoir detailing his service with the 14th (light) Division in France, Reverend Roger Bulstrode stated that ‘In speaking of this sin [fornication], as I very occasionally did, in sermons, I was above all things careful not to tell them it was wrong’.⁶¹ Bulstrode claimed to sympathize with the struggle soldiers faced to avoid sexual opportunity: ‘My point is not that the sin is wrong and degrading (that you know); but to encourage those who feel their weakness and yet hate the sin against which they seem to struggle so helplessly’.⁶² This professed reluctance to condemn soldiers implicitly acknowledged that the military environment was conducive for sexual temptation. Speaking at a bayonet training camp in 1917, Geoffrey Anketell Studdert Kennedy, known as ‘Woodbine Willie’, extended this point by highlighting the detrimental effect of regulated prostitution on the war effort. He began the sermon by proclaiming ‘If we fail to win the fruits of victory, I repeat, it will not be German strength but British weakness which will really be to blame.’⁶³ Studdert Kennedy argued that British military weakness stemmed from endemic ‘diseases of sensuality and perverted lust’, surmising that ‘If all the men who had been knocked out by this disease had been present at some of the critical moments in these years of war, they would have been sufficient to make a considerable difference in the issue of the military operations’.⁶⁴ These points show Studdert Kennedy couching his moral indignation within relatable pragmatic considerations intended to persuade his audience.

Yet rather than shaming soldiers for seeking sexual pleasure, Studdert Kennedy criticized medical and military authorities for endorsing regulated prostitution:

There are men who say that it is Nature, that it always has been and always will be so. [...] [They] [T]each men to be careful, supply them with preventatives and disinfectants . . . and send them to the proper licensed houses. [...] I believe that the best of the medical faculty and the thinking men are behind me when I say that . . . this talk is full of falsehood, and that its total effect is utterly bad.⁶⁵

These remarks adopted the rationale used to justify regulated prostitution and exploited the conspicuous failures of the policy. By noting that regulated prostitution actually increased VD casualty rates, Studdert Kennedy presented the policy as hindering the war effort. Furthermore, by stressing that military and medical officials encouraged men to pursue notionally unnatural practices, he undermined the justification that regulated prostitution maintained morale by insinuating that it dehumanized men. This latter criticism was reinforced by his insistence that soldiers should choose love over lust. Studdert Kennedy admitted that he also longed for female companionship, and noted that ‘the glorious completion of an honest lover’s kiss, is a thing of perfect beauty and a joy for ever in the world.’⁶⁶ However, despite recognizing the escapist appeal of women for soldiers, a point reiterated in his poem ‘Passing the Love of Women’,⁶⁷ he warned the assembled soldiers that they could never achieve emotional satisfaction in a brothel. These observations and warnings blended moral and pragmatic considerations together to produce a more relatable argument for his audience.

Some chaplains approached regulated prostitution and VD with greater pragmatism that downplayed moral considerations. One chaplain cited by P. Clare in his memoir supposedly excused soldiers for seeking sexual intercourse on the grounds that they missed their wives and regulated brothels provided a safe avenue to channel this desire

for intimacy.⁶⁸ However, this endorsement was highly unusual. Instead, many attended VD lectures, debated the effectiveness of preventative policies with medical or military officers, or produced comprehensive lists of VD symptoms, dangers and cures.⁶⁹ While the motivation behind these actions is not always apparent, it suggests that chaplains sought to enrich their understanding of VD to produce nuanced critiques of the policy. This inference is supported by the arguments made at an Anglican clergy meeting in Calais on 22 May 1919, attended by Reverend F. J. Cheverton. The lengthy discussion centred around ‘immorality’ in the army, yet rather than denouncing the actions of soldiers, the meeting highlighted the negative effects of regulated prostitution on military fighting strength and soldiers’ morale.⁷⁰ An initial point argued that the unequal access to women between officers and soldiers might foster animosity within the ranks: ‘offrs [officers] in private billets keep women, and there is a feeling that tis not quite a straight deal to deprive the men because they are in Bks [barracks] and cannot have women in with them there’.⁷¹ After this, the discussion considered the legislative changes passed in March 1918 that moved licenced houses outside military bases, a change driven by public outrage in Britain. The assembled chaplains criticized the impracticality of the legislation, noting the increased likelihood of soldiers contracting VD from unregulated women: ‘if you prevent men going to Licensed houses, you drive them to the “amateur enthusiastic” who is much more dangerous than the old professional’.⁷² Although Cheverton suggested that chaplains must ‘use our influence towards purity’, his assertion presented abstinence as a more effective alternative than the prevailing military policies. This qualification indicates that he recognized the importance of appeals to efficiency grounding moral objections.⁷³ Cheverton’s account shows how a group of Anglican chaplains viewed regulated prostitution as a moral issue complicated by their military context. Though rarely advocating the policy, lower ranking chaplains sympathized with soldiers’ desire for sexual intimacy. Criticisms of regulated prostitution’s ineffectiveness blended moral indignation with practical assessments, indicating a balance between moral beliefs and pragmatism.

The contrast between domestic ‘moralists’ and Anglican chaplains

Though chaplains retained civilian moral principles, the previous section shows that after 1916 chaplains approached prostitution with military pragmatism mixed with moral relativism largely distinct from civilian norms. The disparity between the moral views of civilian clergymen and chaplains is apparent when the latter participated in domestic debates on military sexual ‘immorality’. While the former often condemned the apparent debauchery of military environments, military chaplains empathized with soldiers using sexual intercourse as a form of escapism or introduced pragmatic considerations to the discussion. However, similar to army chaplains, it would be misleading to present civilian ‘moralists’ (social purity groups, religious organizations, and ecclesiastical figures) as solely concerned with the immorality of VD. While these pressure groups largely condemned regulated prostitution as immoral, they also highlighted the negative effects of VD on military strength and criticized the ineffectiveness of preventatives. Yet despite engaging with pragmatic aspects of the debate, these groups often advocated civilian Christian moral expectations ill-suited for the unique

moral circumstances. Furthermore, their points often emphasized the apparent sinfulness of regulated prostitution or identified VD as a hallmark of sin, implying the immorality of soldiers.⁷⁴

On 25 February 1916, the *Church Times*, a weekly Anglican newspaper, published a letter to the editor from 'A Questioner', an anonymous religious figure in Britain. The letter relayed conversations with eight British soldiers on leave to comment on the state of religion in Britain. 'Questioner' argued that there was a prevailing hedonism within the ranks and implied that civilian moral norms had been suspended: 'All, including even the married men, took prostitution for granted as a normal and legitimate necessity. Debased, sensual talk was habitual and incessant. Nor, of course, was drunkenness regarded as a sin'.⁷⁵ These practices, he argued, not only reflected the apathy of soldiers to religion, but also 'were emphatic on the failure of the Chaplains' Department'.⁷⁶ The letter sparked a lively debate between correspondents over whether British soldiers were immoral, and, if so, whether this immorality was symptomatic of irreligion in British society. A response sent by 'C.T.F.', who claimed to be a serving military chaplain, offers a fascinating insight into how chaplains defended soldiers' reputation and presented their role within the army.

Throughout the letter, 'C.T.F.' countered the allegations made by 'Questioner', emphasizing how his experience as a chaplain rendered him a more reliable source of information. In response to the accusation that prostitution was deemed a 'normal and legitimate [military] necessity', 'C.T.F.' dismissed this as a glaring exaggeration: 'In the few cases that have come before me of men having gone wrong, they have admitted and recognized the wrong and have attempted to make amends'.⁷⁷ Although this reply includes only a brief reference to prostitution, it shows how chaplains sought to avoid moral pronouncements on the subject. Rather than proactively seeking out instances of soldiers transgressing moral norms, 'C.T.F.' claimed to wait for soldiers to confess to their actions. Furthermore, by claiming that soldiers admitted and recognized their supposedly rare misdemeanours, 'C.T.F.' denied that civilian moral norms were incompatible with the military environment. Together, these assertions show a sympathetic stance towards soldiers' sexual behaviour and a conciliatory approach to the issue, in contrast to the moral pronouncement made by 'Questioner'.

A similar contrast was apparent in the Meeting of the Church Council on War Problems held at Lambeth Palace on 26 and 27 April 1918. The discussion eventually turned to possible means of curbing VD rates. When Chaplain General Rt. Rev. Bishop Taylor Smith was asked about his thoughts on the issue, he demonstrated his detachment from developments in France. He bemoaned the apparent ignorance of chaplains on VD: 'I have been dealing with my brother clergy for the last three-and-a-half-years, and I am struck with the indifference and the fear based on ignorance as to how to tackle this question'.⁷⁸ He followed this statement by denying any chance of curtailing VD without applying Christian morality: 'Medical, mechanical and legal methods have been tried to make the sin of fornication safe. They have failed and must fail, because God has stamped the sin of fornication with the hallmark of venereal disease'.⁷⁹ In stark contrast, Reverend Llewellyn Hughes, a serving chaplain to the forces, offered a pragmatic recommendation: 'From my own personal observation I say what is required is infinitely more drastic legislation'.⁸⁰ He supported this proposal by describing an incident where one camp had more VD cases than others:

The doctor and I worked it out. We traced the evil to one person, or one house, rather. By the aid of the doctor and the municipal authorities we managed to clear the whole thing away. I can give my reasons and illustrations, but I say that to tackle this question we must have a determined effort by means of legislation.⁸¹

The practical measures suggested by Hughes, a chaplain immersed in the military environment, in contrast to the rigid Christian principles advocated by Taylor Smith, illustrate the sharp distinction between civilian ecclesiastical ideals towards sexual morality and those moulded on the Front. While Taylor Smith expected Christian morality to persevere in military contexts, Hughes suggested a more pragmatic, sympathetic approach that recognized the appeal of prostitution to soldiers.

This disparity is also apparent in chaplains' addresses to fellow clergymen outlining the challenges of ministering to soldiers. In response to mounting concerns voiced by domestic pressure groups over rising VD rates, some chaplains attempted to redirect anger at military authorities creating an enabling environment. In 1916, Reverend Tom Pym and Reverend Geoffrey Gordon wrote *Papers from Picardy*, a candid record of their war experiences in the B.E.F. While Pym reflected on the conflict's effect on soldiers moral character, Gordon commented on the difficulties chaplains faced catering for soldiers' spiritual welfare. Chaplains' dilemma, according to Gordon, was whether 'to stand strongly, definitely, and exclusively for spiritual things, in which case he will have to be content to come in contact with only a very few men; or . . . throw himself into a number of minor activities, and run the risk of getting rarely on to a higher spiritual level'.⁸² Gordon concluded this reflection by proclaiming that chaplains should embrace the 'unique opportunity of sharing with men a hundred intimate occupations of daily life'.⁸³ This emphasis on empathizing with soldiers' plight shapes his final thought in the book on the purpose of military chaplaincy. Alongside providing services and spiritual care, chaplains should, according to Gordon,

help men in their struggles against vice and temptation. It is in this last that the power of definite, articulate churchmanship is most evident. Young men, living an unnatural life, under war conditions, have one or two temptations, against which the struggle is extraordinarily difficult.⁸⁴

This proclaimed responsibility to help soldiers overcome temptation reflected a subtle shift from the moralistic interventions earlier in the conflict. Rather than condemning soldiers for soliciting regulated prostitution, Gordon stressed that prospective chaplains and contemporaries needed to sympathize with how the abnormal environment drove men to notionally immoral activities.

Conclusion

Anglican chaplains' responses to regulated prostitution must be viewed as another manifestation of the tension between spiritual and military responsibilities in a challenging role. Rather than a consistent demand for purity and self-restraint, chaplains voiced a complex blend of moral and pragmatic arguments as the war progressed. In part, this shift emerged from the acclimatization to a unique environment defined by the suspension of civilian moral codes. As chaplains witnessed the psychological strain that the abnormal conditions placed on soldiers, they recognized that sexual intercourse and intimacy with

women provided a fleeting form of escapism. Civilian moral norms were suspended in the liminal moral environment, a point stressed in the 1919 report *The Army and Religion* that surveyed chaplains, medical and military officers between 1917 to 1918: ‘Where men are put in abnormal conditions there are bound to be abnormal reactions’.⁸⁵

Chaplains’ empathy with soldiers’ behaviour was accompanied by criticisms of military authorities creating an enabling environment. Anglican chaplains of all ranks noted that soldiers were encouraged to indulge in sexual impulses for the ambiguous justification of morale. However, in a move that reflected their adjustment to the liminal moral environment and a more clearly defined role after the reorganization of the AChD, chaplains’ criticisms challenged the efficiency of regulated prostitution. Senior chaplains questioned the wisdom of continuing the policy by highlighting its detrimental impact on fighting strength and morale. Lower ranking chaplains blended pragmatic considerations with moral judgements to make their objections more relatable and persuasive to soldiers. These modifications show that Anglican chaplains engaged with regulated prostitution in a dynamic, multi-faceted fashion. Rather than exhibiting a static moral aversion throughout the conflict, after 1915 chaplains approached regulated prostitution as a moral and practical issue requiring nuance and tact.

These conclusions shed light on the ecclesiastical debates on sexuality during the Inter-War period. Former Anglican chaplains continued to criticize regulated prostitution employed by military authorities during the occupation of the Rhineland, implicitly downplaying the moral culpability of soldiers.⁸⁶ Furthermore, one of the major advocates of pre-marital sex education and birth control in marriage, Thomas Wentworth Pym, was a former Anglican Army chaplain. His insistence that pleasure and intimacy should arise from marital sexual intercourse points to ideas encouraged on the Front infiltrating Anglican civilian debates.⁸⁷ This study also highlights the need for historians to acknowledge the complexity of the moralist position debate on VD and regulated prostitution during the First World War. Similar to ‘modernizers’, ‘moralists’ expressed a complex tension between practical and moral considerations that undermines a binary approach to the subject. When chaplains engaged in domestic debates on ‘immorality’, they expressed pragmatic and sympathetic considerations alongside civilian moral norms. Further research is needed to discern the impact of these interactions on broader domestic debates during the war. Another fruitful study could question the ‘moralist’ stance attributed to army chaplains and the Anglican Church in response to VD and prostitution during the Second World War.⁸⁸ Far from rigidly preaching the Ten Commandments, Anglican chaplains’ responses to regulated prostitution expressed a pragmatic relativism that blurs neat categories of ‘moralist’ and ‘modernizer’.

Notes

1. Feminist scholars stress that ‘prostitute/prostitution’ is a problematic term that reinforces patriarchal attitudes towards female sexuality, with ‘sex work(er)’ recognizing agency and distancing the profession from implicit moral connotations – see Overall, “What’s Wrong with Prostitution?” 705–724; and Pheterson, “Whore Stigma,” 39–64. While I am sensitive to, and an ally of, these discursive nuances, I have chosen to refer to ‘licenced brothels’ (known as *maison tolérées*) as ‘regulated prostitution’ in this article for two reasons. First, I aim to convey the sense of tension that chaplains felt between pragmatic and moral considerations on the subject during the conflict. Second, my use of ‘regulated prostitution’

- aims to emphasize how British military authorities' stance towards, and incorporation of, female sex workers on the Western Front as an institution reinforced existing misogynist prejudices.
2. Keable, *Standing By*, 117.
 3. *Ibid.*, 119.
 4. *Ibid.*, 117.
 5. *Ibid.*, 118.
 6. Barry, *Period of My Life*, 57.
 7. Doan, "Sex Education and the Great War Soldier," 647–648. For a similar assessment of historical analyses of debates on military sexual practices during the Second World War, see Harrison, "Sex and the Citizen Soldier," 230–232.
 8. Examples of this distinction include Beardsley, "Allied Against Sin," 189–202; Gibson, "Sex and Soldiering," 543–544; and Levine, *Prostitution, Race and Politics*, 147–150.
 9. Cherry, *Sex and Morale*, 17–64; Doan, "Sex Education and the Great War Soldier," 641–663; Harrison, "Problem of Venereal Disease," 133–158; Harrison, *The Medical War*, 124–163; Makepeace, "Male Heterosexuality," 65–83; Simpson, "Morale and Sexual Morality," 20–34; and Whitehead, "The British Medical Officer," 163–184.
 10. Harrison, "Problem of Venereal Disease," 135, 140; Makepeace, "Punters and their Prostitutes," 418–419; and Cherry, *Sex and Morale*, 101.
 11. Examples of these redemptive narratives include Moynihan, ed., *God on our Side*; and Wilkinson, "Paradox of the Military Chaplain," 249–257.
 12. Madigan, *Faith Under Fire*; Snape, "Goodbye to All That," 318–345; Snape, "Chaplains and Capital Courts-Martial," 357–368; and Snape and Madigan, eds., *The Clergy in Khaki*.
 13. Parker, *Shellshocked Prophets*.
 14. Snape, *Army Chaplains' Department*, 239–241. See also Brown, "Army Chaplains," 118–119; and Snape, *God and the British Soldier*, 56.
 15. Howson, "Contributions of British Army Chaplains," 60–72.
 16. This idea of sexual intercourse acting as a form of escapism reflected military authorities' obsessive desire to maintain soldiers' morale during the First World. See Cherry, *Sex and Morale*, 39–64, 99–123. Soldiers viewed sexual intercourse as a form of psychological release, drawn to female company as a momentary distraction from the horrors of war. See IWM Documents.11667; Eachus, January 15, 1917; and Durrell, *Whizzbangs and Woodbines*, 36.
 17. Howson, *Muddling Through*, 14–18.
 18. Brown, "Army Chaplains," 33–37.
 19. Howson, *Muddling Through*, 100.
 20. May, *Artists Rifles*, 177.
 21. Snape, *Royal Army Chaplains' Department*, 194.
 22. Examples include Clayton, *Tales of Talbot House*, 14–15; and Tiplady, *Cross at the Front*, 83–84.
 23. Michael Snape has hinted at these points but does not expand on them. See Snape, "British Catholicism and the British Army," 342, 348. Largely, however, prostitution has been a neglected topic in analyses of Catholic army chaplains.
 24. IWM, Documents. 8514, Canon F. H. Drinkwater, September 6, 1915, 24 February 1918; MAC, George T. Griffin, January 10, 1916; *West London Observer*, February 23, 1917, 5; and Plater, ed., *Catholic Soldiers*, 70–79. The papers of Principal Catholic Chaplain Father Bernard Steven Rawlinson, held at Downside Abbey, show senior catholic chaplains experiencing tension between practical and moral considerations on VD and regulated prostitution. See Downside Abbey, Rawlinson, 3230.
 25. Cherry, *Sex and Morale*, 39.
 26. *Ibid.*, 46–47.
 27. Gleig, *Hints and Instructions to Military Chaplains*, 1.
 28. Hall, "War, STDs, the Military," 205–211.
 29. Harrison, *The Medical War*, 153–155.
 30. George, *Lord Kitchener*, vol. 3, 27, cited in Cherry, *Sex and Morale*, 81.

31. Anonymous, *King's Regulations*, 107.
32. Gibson, "Sex and Soldiering," 563. This punishment of officers points to how class stereotypes and prejudices affected the implementation of the policy.
33. Cowman, "Touring Behind Enemy Lines," 114–117; and Cherry, *Sex and Morale*, 124–223.
34. IWM Documents.11667, S. T. Eachus, January 23, 1917.
35. Cherry, *Sex and Morale*, 65–80.
36. Mitchell and Smith, *History of the Great War*, 73, 77, 131, 144–145, 156, 164, 174, cited in Cherry, *Sex and Morale*, 69.
37. Anonymous, *King's Regulations*, 266–267.
38. Madigan, *Faith Under Fire*, 93–94.
39. *Ibid.*, 132–134; and Brown, "Army Chaplains," 114–117.
40. Creighton, *Twenty-Ninth Division*, 7, cited in Snape, *Royal Army Chaplains' Department*, 240.
41. Clayton, *Tales of Talbot House*, 14–15.
42. IWM, SA 9875/8, George Ashurst.
43. Brown, "Army Chaplains," 63–64.
44. Blackburne, ed., *Chaplains in Council*, 47–48, cited in Madigan, *Faith Under Fire*, 116.
45. Norman Demuth, cited in Max Arthur, *Forgotten Voices*, 166, cited in Madigan, *Faith Under Fire*, 138.
46. IWM, 07/81/1 Reverend C. Bell, Documents.16061, February 25, 1918.
47. Unfortunately, disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic meant that I was unable to access Bishop Gwynne's diaries held at the University of Birmingham. These resources may provide further insights into Gwynne's stance to VD and *maison tolérées* prior to the A.C.G. conferences and shed further light on his motivation for mobilizing chaplains.
48. MAC, A.C.G.'s Conferences 1916, Sixth Conference, November 28, 1916, 4.
49. *Ibid.*
50. *Ibid.*
51. *Ibid.*
52. *Ibid.*
53. *Ibid.*
54. *Ibid.*
55. *Ibid.*, Eighth Conference, February 20–21, 1917, 7.
56. Unfortunately, disruption caused by the COVID-19 meant I was unable to access Bishop Gwynne's diaries held at the University of Birmingham, where Gwynne's diaries are stored. These entries may shed light on Gwynne's collaboration with the Americans in 1918.
57. MAC, A.C.G Conferences 1917–1918, Twelfth Conference, January 23–24, 1918, 10.
58. *Ibid.*
59. *Ibid.*
60. *Ibid.*
61. IWM, 87/10/1, Bulstrode, Documents.1276, 86.
62. *Ibid.*, 86–87.
63. Studdert Kennedy, *Rough Talks*, 98.
64. *Ibid.* 102.
65. *Ibid.*, 103–104.
66. *Ibid.*, 106–107.
67. Studdert Kennedy, *More Rough Rhymes*, 28–30.
68. IWM, 06/48/1. P. Clare letter to mother dated October 29, 1916, cited in Makepeace, "Male Heterosexuality," 70.
69. MAC Diary of Reverend Guy Beech, February 7, 1919, E34; Allen, Gray, Walleth and Gibson, *Corner-Stone of Reconstruction*, 112; and *The Times*, June 6, 1918, 3.
70. MAC, Diary of Reverend F. J. Cheverton, May 22, 1919.
71. *Ibid.*
72. *Ibid.*

73. Ibid.
74. Further examples of this tension are apparent in *Thanet Advertiser*, May 19, 1917, 4; *Chester Chronicle*, January 19, 1918, 2; *Coventry Standard*, March 29, 1918, 5.
75. *Church Times*, February 25, 1916, 191.
76. Ibid.
77. Ibid., March 3, 1916, 200.
78. MAC, Church Council on War Problems. Report of Proceeding at a Meeting of the Church Council, April 26–27, 1918, 34.
79. Ibid., 34–35.
80. Ibid., 35.
81. Ibid.
82. Pym and Gordon, *Papers from Picardy*, 124.
83. Ibid., 115.
84. Ibid., 224–225.
85. Cairns, ed., *Army and Religion*, 369.
86. A small selection of these sources includes: Studdert Kennedy, *Lies!* 75–84; *Common Cause*, June 17, 1921, 312; IWM, 87/10/1, Bulstrode, Documents.1276, 123–124; and Grey, *As Tommy Sees Us*, 20–21.
87. Pym, “The Need of Education in Questions of Sex,” 186–190.
88. Harris, “Preaching Morality,” 81–98; Snape, *Royal Army Chaplains’ Department*, 326–328; and Roberts, “The Price of Discretion,” 1003.

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