

## Wonder

Volume: 1 Number: 1 Theme: **Engaging Modern Atheism**  
Title: **“No Atheists in Foxholes?”** Author: **Fr. Sean Levine**

Perhaps you have heard it said that there are no atheists in foxholes. Speaking as one who has spent some time in “foxholes”, I can tell you with certainty that this is not true. As a Chaplain’s Assistant and as a Chaplain in the U.S. Army for close to ten years in various reserve and active duty positions, I have spent time in South Korea and two combat tours in Iraq, and I have to tell you that I have come across my share of atheists as well as a host of other systems of belief and disbelief. There seems to be no end to the variety of religious and non-theistic positions represented in today’s military, and the one thing no one should ever say about any religion, philosophy, or belief systems is this: “You won’t find that in combat once the bullets start to fly.” This is simply not true.

That is not to say that people do not care about death and dying. Some do not, but most do, and fear is fear whether you find it in the face of a person with no professed faith, or in the face of a die-hard believer. No one likes the threat of death or dismemberment resulting from the hostile actions of someone who has vowed to kill him or her, but the simple fact is this: Fear of death or of one’s enemy does not always motivate faith in God. Further, the kind of faith that does arise in the face of death may or may not be genuine. What dynamic governs “battlefield belief?” Often it is nothing more than a bargaining chip grasped in response to the imminent threat of death rather than a real encounter with God leading true faith.

Generalizations always stand vulnerable to the contradiction of specific exceptions. Surely, some people in combat find a real and lasting belief in God, and there are many stories to prove it. What I want to flat out deny is the validity of the position that “foxholes” naturally and invariably bring people to faith. I say “no,” and this refutes the idea the atheism does not have the strength to stand up under the pressure of combat and possible death. It is insulting and demeaning to a person who claims to be an atheist to suggest that his/her disbelief in God represents a weak position that cannot withstand the rigors of harsh experiences and that all atheists “convert” in combat.

More important than this is the fact that many convinced theists walk away from the trauma of combat with a broken faith system and a rejection of their previous belief in God. If the reports of returning soldiers are to be taken seriously, we have to acknowledge that wartime trauma is just as likely to obliterate a person’s belief in God as it is to encourage it. Why is this? In my experience, it has everything to do with unrealistic expectations, a damning dynamic in any serious relationship. People often expect something of their idea of God that they do not find in war; that is to say, God does not behave according to the expectations that many believers hold dear.

War brings with it unspeakable death and destruction, and this might be relatively easy to stomach when you read about it in the paper or see short clips on TV. However, when you experience the sights, smells, sounds, tactile sensations, and emotions first hand, it brings the reality into your life with an entirely different, and often very painful, impact. The areas of a person’s brain and personality that govern belief (as opposed to excursive, rational logic) can be invaded by wartime experiences, and this invasive assimilation of the horrors of war can change a person at a very fundamental and uncontrollable level. It is not rational to jump under a table when someone accidentally slams a door, but many veterans do it; the response comes from deep within the neuro-psychological center of the person. It is not rational for a soldier, who has had

to kill an enemy, to be bitterly angry at people he used to love; the anger comes from a wound deep within the moral center of the soldier and he/she “acts this out” upon loved ones.

At this very deep level, where faith and trust exist and function, war can break things and overload circuits bringing about the damage or entire collapse of the belief system. This is not a rational rejection of faith, but a loss of the ability to trust and believe brought on by the absolute moral sewer into which the warrior is tossed when he or she engages in modern warfare. “How could God allow this to happen to these people, to us, to me?” says many a combat veteran who has experienced the pain and brokenness of war.

Far from being some sort of ludicrous, unthinkable response to the world in which we live, atheism responds to one of the most challenging questions ever asked: How can a loving, personal God allow the horror and evil of war? God is either too weak to do anything about it or perfectly capable of stopping it but not compassionate enough to care.

It is not my aim to answer such questions, but rather to acknowledge them as valid concerns that emerge with force within the lives of those who deploy into war zones. Not only are there atheists in foxholes, but there are both many atheists who come home from war more firmly convinced than ever before and many believers who emerge from foxholes, when they come out physically alive, as atheists.

Belief and combat trauma encounter one another in complex ways resulting in complex effects because every human being responds in a unique and personal way to this encounter. Many people turn to God in a crisis while many others either do not turn to God or actually turn away from God. This raises a myriad of questions that I cannot handle in the brief article, but I hope that I have encouraged a reevaluation of the popular quip “there are no atheists in foxholes” and a deeper consideration of the relationship between combat and faith.

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**Discussion Questions:**

What are some of the sources of your belief in God?

How can a loving, personal God allow the horror and evil of war?

Have you had any experiences that challenged your belief in God?

Are generalizations ever useful?