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“How Evil is Today’s World? A Consideration of the World War I Battle of Verdun

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Many evangelical Christians believe the world is about to end as Jesus returns to establish his heavenly kingdom on Earth. The reason for this, they think, is that the people of the world have become so evil and are doing so many horrible things that more wickedness is not possible. If the trigger for Jesus’ second coming is the total evil in the world -- the largest amount of horrible deeds people do to each other -- then I respectfully suggest he missed the moment. One hundred years ago this coming November, World War I ended. That brought to a close five years of unrelenting war in which 9 million soldiers were killed, and millions more were injured. Another 10 million civilians died.

If evil occurs when people sin against each other -- and, certainly, the organized mass murder of war, a clear violation of one of the Ten Commandments, belongs to the classification of sin -- then World War I was surely an eviler time than today. To be sure, the present war in Iraq and Afghanistan comprises the longest war the USA has ever fought. But if we measure the amount of evil by the extent of casualties -- unquestionably a crass measurement -- there is less evil today than during World War I. According to the 10-year assessment of U.S. military casualties done in 2011, 6,169 soldiers were killed in Iraq and Afghanistan in the decade after the 9/11 attack in 2001. Just over 45,000 U.S. troops were injured. The militaries of other countries have similar statistics, while estimates of civilian casualties during the same period range upward of 200,000.

These are by no means insignificant numbers, and every life lost or person handicapped is a tragedy for individuals and for their families, as well as their nations.

The numbers pale in comparison to the casualties of World War I, however. Let’s look at a single battle from that war, the Battle of Verdun, in which an attacking German army fought for 10 months in 1916 against the French army and its colonial allies (mostly Muslim). At any one time, more than 700,000 German troops were fighting against an allied French army of 500,000 troops.

In just 10 months, more than 300,000 soldiers on the two sides were killed. Another 400,000

were wounded. If killing another human being is evil, then much more malevolence took place around Verdun in those 10 months than happened in Iraq and Afghanistan in 10 years. And it was not just that people were killed; it was the way they were killed. The Germans opened the battle Feb. 21, 1916, with days of nonstop shelling by long-range cannon. The forested hills quickly became denuded. Most trees were reduced to kindling; little remained over 6 feet tall.

Even before the shelling, it had begun to rain. And it continued to rain throughout the next 10 months. There was so much rain that, even during the heat of summer, the ground never dried out. Mud was everywhere. There was so much mud that men often got stuck and drowned in it. The only place for cover were trenches cut into the muddy hillsides. Both sides considered it “hell.”

This was one of the first mechanized battles in history, where men did not charge at each other to engage in hand-to-hand combat or shoot at each other across an open field or hillside, but fired cannons from several miles away. The ground quickly lost its normal shape, becoming filled with holes and blasted mounds of earth, rearranged with each explosion. Even today, a century later, there is no level ground in the battlefield larger than a square yard or so. It goes up and down, 6 feet here, 12 feet there. There are no straight lines; it looks as if an ocean of earth was tossed about in a violent storm and suddenly solidified.

Today, no development in the area is allowed, not even farming. A recent analysis estimated that 10 million unexploded shells remain. Many of them are filled with inert poison gas, deadly even after a century. Annually, more than 40 tons of unexploded armaments are removed. For Verdun, the world ended in 1916. The villages and farms in the surrounding hills were destroyed, never to be resettled. Although the lush forest has regrown, human life has ended except for the pilgrims, who come to learn of the war and to mourn the dead. If the world’s evil did not cause Jesus to return in 1916, what are the chances that he will return now in our much less violently vicious times?

