

The Cenotaph:

A contested and consensual symbol of remembrance

*Summary of a paper by Professor Norman Bonney
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The Cenotaph in Whitehall, London, had its origins as a temporary construction that was the centrepiece of the Peace Parade of July 1919 following the conclusion of the Treaty of Versailles. Numerous formations of armed forces from the UK, the Empire and other allied nations saluted the fallen at the monument. The only inscriptions on it are 'The Glorious Dead' and '1914-1918' and '1939-1945'.

The Cenotaph was designed by Edwin Lutyens who was working with the Imperial War Graves Commission. He championed secular commemoration because the war dead were from many different nations and religions. The Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, also insisted on a secular monument and explicitly rejected an alternative proposal for a large cross at Admiralty Arch.

So popular was the temporary monument that it was decided that it should be replaced by a permanent one and the Cabinet explicitly rejected Church of England proposals that it should have Christian inscriptions on it or a cross on top of it because of the religious and belief diversity of the dead of the war.

It was inaugurated as a permanent monument on 11 November 1919 by a simple unveiling by King George V accompanied by the first two minutes silence.

The unprecedented mass emotion surrounding the monument made the Church of England very fearful that an alternative state cult was emerging as the centre of the Nation's and Empire's grief over the more than one million dead. The tomb of the Unknown Warrior in Westminster Abbey was devised by the Church as an alternative religious site for the memorialisation of the war dead. Sprung on the cabinet at short notice the proposal and the ceremonial associated with the passage of the body past the Cenotaph at 1100 am on 11 November 1920, on its way to the Abbey, enabled the Church to introduce Christian religious rituals at the ceremonial at the Cenotaph. In the event, too,

Christian language was included on the tomb of the warrior in the Abbey even despite a contrary cabinet decision that the tomb would be secular.

There is also clear evidence that from 1921-23 that the Church was attempting to arrange for the official state ceremony of remembrance to be conducted permanently in Westminster Abbey as a religious occasion and not at the Cenotaph. The public reaction was, however, so strong that when this was attempted in 1923 the plan had to be abandoned.

The Cenotaph is a state memorial and not a Christian one. But Christian rituals are prominent in the ceremony. A bishop leads a religious procession. A cross is borne in front of the procession and the bishop invokes the 'Lord Jesus Christ' in a prayer.

The paper concludes by suggesting that because of the origins of the Cenotaph and the changing character of public belief in the present era when at least a quarter of the population have no religion and Christians have a diminishing but still slight majority it is not appropriate for there to be any role for the Church of England in the proceedings on Remembrance Sunday at the Cenotaph.

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