The First World War and American Protestantism

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When the United States entered the war in 1917 it was a Christian nation, not in terms of official status or recognition, but certainly in terms of predominance of the religion among it's population[1] and the apparent spiritual climate of the nation. Even before the war, preachers were proclaiming America's place in God's plan for the world and it's execution,[2] even Woodrow Wilson dabbled in such statements during his lifetime, going as far during his presidential campaign to say "I believe that light to shine out of the heavens that God himself has created ... America has promised herself and promised the world this great heritage."[3] America's spiritual fervor was furthered all the more by apocalyptic expectations, a result of premillenial expectations that dominated the English speaking world,[4] the influential work of Cyrus Scofield on dispensationalism,[5] and the rise of the Pentecostal movement.[6] Even the American college was portrayed in religious terms with its origins in the Christian church.[7] "This is without even mentioning the genesis of the fundamentalist movement and the climate created by the doctrine it espoused.[8] It should thus come as no surprise that the war and Christianity in America would come in contact with each other. What might be surprising though is how much of America's approach to the war was fundamentally shaped by the Christian views of the nation, a fact that is especially apparent when examining Protestants in the country.

Among Protestant churches in the United States three positions began to emerge in response to the war. The positions were summed up by John F. Piper Jr. as such:

Some claimed the pacifist position, which repudiated all participation in the war, and

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1 Philip Jenkins, *The Great and Holy War: How World War I Became a Religious Crusade* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 92.
2 Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause 1865-1920* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1980), 165-166.
3 Malcolm D. Magee, *What the World Should Be: Woodrow Wilson and the Crafting of a Faith-Based Foreign Policy (*Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008), 38.
4 Jenkins, 137.
5 Jenkins, 138.
6 Jenkins, 139.
7 Charles Franklin Thwing, *The American Colleges and Universities in The Great War* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1920), 151.
8 Jenkins, 140.

> rejected war as evil. Others chose the militant position, which celebrated war as a weapon of righteousness, and accepted the war as a holy crusade. Still others argued for a middle ground position, which focused on ministry and sough to develop a wartime ministry without damning either war or the enemy.[9]

Those who took the militant position are among the easiest to document for two reasons. The first is that this group was among the loudest and was totally unrestrained by censors.[10] The second is the work of Ray Abrams presented in 1933's *Preachers Present Arms*. This work is considered a classic of sorts when examining American Christianity during the war,[11] but as time has progressed, so has the criticism of Abrams. Abrams conclusion was that during the war the American Church lost it's Gospel imperative, letting itself become too closely associated with capitalism and nationalism, with the term "sellout" serving as the best descriptor for the their actions.[12] Abrams was certainly not the only author to take the sellout view. When discussing African-American churches, Miles Mark Fisher, after listing some benefits the war afforded these churches, laments the cost of these gains in terms of "propagating lies, in fightings, in schisms, in politics, in spiritual losses, and in sexual immorality."[13]

Abrams and others of similar mind certainly had a wealth of source material to substantiate these claims. Evangelist Billy Sunday characterized the war effort as "Bill against Woodrow, Germany against America, Hell against Heaven ... Either you are loyal or you are not, you are either a patriot or a black-hearted traitor."[14] One could also examine Dwight Hillis, a pastor from Brooklyn, who called for "the sterilization of 10,000,000 German soldiers and the segregation of women, [so] that when this generation of Germans goes, civilized cities, states, and races may be rid of this awful cancer."[15]

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9 John F. Piper Jr., *The American Churches in World War I* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1985), 11.
10 Piper, 11.
11 Jenkins, 93.
12 Piper, 2.
13 Miles Mark Fisher, "The Negro Church and the World-War," *The Journal of Religion* 5 (Sept., 1925), 499.
14 Piper, 11.
15 Piper, 11-12.

But the militarist view, and thus the sellout view, is not without it's shortcomings. Piper in particular points out a “strong pacifist bias”[16] within Abrams' and makes mention of “Christianity and civil liberty, religion, and democracy, were intertwined in America in a unique way that could easily lead to confusion of values,”[17] with the latter of these two points hearkening back to the American perception of their special place in the world and God's plan. When it is also considered that “over two hundred separate Protestant denominations existed when the war began,”[18] it is hard to make such a sweeping generalization as Abrams did. Nevertheless, however problematic is may be, the sellout view is necessary to examine when considering the range of approaches the American Church took as a whole.

If one were to try and make a generalization of the Protestant response, perhaps the best lens to look through would be that of The Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America, or more succinctly, The Federal Council of Churches (FCC). The FCC was by far the most diverse group of Protestants in America representing over two-thirds of all ministers and communicants.[19] Once war came to America, the FCC was faced with the unenviable task of developing a position that honoured both their nation and their faith. A special meeting was called with an invitation being extended to the FCC body as well as Protestant mission and social work agencies who would have a stake in the development of programs during the war effort.[20] Here, perhaps the defining statement of what the middle ground position ought to be was made by FCC President Reverend Frank Mason North. He stated:

> War, however just and unselfish in its aims, places upon the nation an incalculable moral strain ... The churches will, with fresh enthusiasm, consecrate their resources of

16 Piper, 2.
17 Piper, 2.
18 Piper, 10.
19 Piper, 4.
20 Piper, 14.

> courage, of sacrifice, of service, of prayer, to the uses of the nation as it steadies itself for the travail and the triumph of war ... They will bring their reserves of mercy and kindness to the sick and wounded and desolate ... They will surrender their most tireless workers, their best trained students, their strongest ministers, for the common service and the highest spiritual tasks ... They will resist with all their power the sordid influences of selfishness and materialism which war so surely fosters and will strive ... to renew from day to day the moral and spiritual vitality of the nation without which the victory of its arms would be the defeat of the ideals ... We are here ... not to stimulate our patriotism, nor to assert our loyalty, but to accept our responsibility, to define our task, and to determine our program.[21]

North's address was not an unashamed endorsement of the war, but it was not an unabashed critique either. North had managed to portray a willingness to serve a higher cause that America was now part of, but also recognized Christian ideals that sustained that higher cause and, by extension, the threats facing the Church as it journeyed through the war. North's address was furthered, and book-ended in a sense, by a report from the Committee on Message which stated:

> We are Christians as well as citizens. Upon us therefore rests a double responsibility. We owe it to our country to maintain intact and to transmit unimpaired to our descendants our heritage of freedom and democracy. Above and beyond this, we must be loyal to our divine Lord, who gave his life that the world might be redeemed, and whose loving purpose embraces every man and every nation.[22]

Here the American ideals of freedom and democracy are intrinsically linked with Christianity, the redemption of the world, and God's purposes for mankind. Again one is reminded of America's self-

21 Charles S. MacFarland, ed., *The Churches of Christ in Time of War* (New York: Missionary Education Movement of The United States and Canada, 1917), 8-9.
22 MacFarland, 129.

perceived special place in God's plan for the world.

It is remarkable to note that this middle ground message seems to have resonated with the American Christian community as a whole, even if the resonance was not explicitly recognized at the time. Walter Russell Bowie, a Virginia minister who would eventually serve as a chaplain in the army, espoused many of these principles in his sermons throughout 1917. While stating that the war provided a "God given" opportunity for individuals to contribute to the nations welfare[23] he also noted that:

> The war also brought spiritual risks. Lest revenge become a dominant motive, Americans needed to remember that "brutality cannot be conquered by brutality." Patriotism, he warned, could degenerate into a "hysterical" "mob spirit" that would abuse dissenters, throttle free speech, and harm the individual rights that were "the genius of America."[24]

Bowie thus serves as a great example of the middle ground perspective being displayed on a more personal, less institutional level. He espoused the opportunity to work towards a greater good in the war, an opportunity ordained by God himself, while still recognizing the strain the war would place on the faith of the nation and the need for pure, Christian motives to combat this strain.

This statement from Bowie, who being located in Virginia, also provides interesting insight into the state of Christianity in the American South. After the Civil War, Southerners began "maintaining a culture separate from the rest [America]."[25] World War I has been identified as one of the key turning points in a movement away from this attitude as it "provided the perfect context for Southern ministers to identify again with the values of the American nation."[26] This was in large part because "Southern clergyman had ... redefined [Confederacy] as a crusade for liberty, as well as for morality and religion,

23 Samuel C. Shepherd Jr., "No 'Summer Holiday'. The Chaplaincy of Richmond's Walter Russell Bowie in World War I," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 112 (2004), 270.
24 Shepherd, 270.
25 Wilson, 161.
26 Wilson, 161.

so that a way had been prepared for linking [Confederacy] with the American cause in World War I."[27] These values were, once again, even furthered by a fundamental belief in the providence of God's plan and his special mission for the American people. One minister emphasized this connection by identifying the South with God's chosen people of the Bible, the Israelites. He emphasized that "Southerners should remember their forty years in the wilderness of defeat, and he believed they could now understand God's purpose."[28] Connections such as this validated the South as a part of God's plan and the values for which they had supposedly fought. The fact that these views were also shared by the greater part of American Christians made a re-identification with the nation as a whole all the more suitable, a trigger such as the war was all that was needed to strengthen those ties. The war thus provided a unique opportunity to reintegrate the South into the American fabric, an opportunity that can be understood in much more in depth when considering the religious climate of the South and America as a whole.

It is easy to dismiss the previous statements from Bowie and the FCC as idyllic and limit their importance in lieu of the larger war effort, especially as they came in the early stages of American involvement. But this would not be the case as the war progressed. Protestant mobilization was furthered by the FCC through the General War-Time Commission, a special commission that operated from September 1917 to April 1919 to serve the FCC's wartime needs.[29] This was in addition to another FCC special committee, the General Committee on Army and Navy Chaplains, although this committee did work in close cooperation with the Commission.[30] The Commission, and FCC as a whole, undertook many social service projects, fostering a spirit of Christian cooperation in the process.[31]

However, the Commission had one noticeable shortcoming, their failing to take a strong stand

27 Wilson, 174.
28 Wilson, 166.
29 Piper, 35.
30 Piper, 42.
31 Piper, 144.

on the issue of conscientious objection.[32] For the majority of the FCC membership, this issue would have been negligible as it was contrary to their war efforts, and perhaps this was what prevented the Commission from taking a stronger position than they did. One of the great benefits of the Commission was the spirit of unity it fostered among participating churches and the chance it afforded them to participate in a greater, God ordained, purpose for the world which dominated American Christian thought. To cater to a small special interest group would have created an inherent tension with these benefits, thus it was easier for the Commission to dismiss the issue and act in a less firm manner than some may have desired them to.

Returning to the FCC as a whole, one would be amiss not to recognize the work done through their chaplaincy programs for the soldiers. Under the FCC and their wartime program the chaplains were of utmost importance as "they carried the Word and sacraments to the men under arms."[33] This mission to the soldiers was very much in line with their statements about the trials which the war would present, and the need to resist compromising Christian values in these trials. The work of the American Church has been described as "major and stirring"[34] in regards to the chaplaincy program and these statements are all the more meaningful when it is considered government cooperation in the program was lacking. Some issues included numbers of chaplains appointed,[35] limiting which chaplains could go overseas,[36] and the establishment of training schools for chaplains.[37] Negotiations with government officials were thus a key part in establishing an effective chaplaincy program[38] and the work proved to be invaluable. Chaplains such as the previously mentioned Walter Russell Bowie were able to remind soldiers "that God's presence was with both the soldiers and family members, who in love and faith

32 Piper, 144-145.
33 Piper, 13.
34 Piper, 129.
35 Piper, 118.
36 Shepherd, 274.
37 Piper, 122.
38 Piper, 129.

were probably praying for the men at that very moment,"[39] and also "create a sense of spiritual kinship,"[40] through their services.

Protestants were also able to mobilize the middle ground position through faith based organizations such as the YMCA and Salvation army. The YMCA and Salvation Army present unique cases as neither was charged with fundamentally religious duties during the war. The primary duty of the YMCA was "to see the amusement of the troops, as well as to their physical and moral well being,"[41] and the Salvation Army was portrayed in a more humanitarian light with the Army's US commander stating "The Salvationist stands ready, trained in all necessary qualification in every phase of humanitarian work,"[42] at the onset of the war. This did lead to some criticism regarding the lack of a religious element in their works, especially against the YMCA,[43] but this should be understood in lieu of the fact the charge for both groups was not an explicitly spiritual charge. Even so, their mandate was still portrayed in religious terms on occasion with the first group of Salvation Army workers to head overseas being told "You are going overseas to serve Christ. You must forget yourselves, be examples of His love, be willing to endure hardship, to lay down your lives, if need be, for His sake."[44] These services were no doubt in line with Christian virtues such as humility, serving, and sacrificing oneself for others. With the sacramental portion of service being taken care of by chaplains these organizations were able to provide for the morale of soldiers, an inherently good cause, and thus also taking part in the battle for moral and spiritual vitality created by the pressures of the war.

One group that deserves special attention in this discussion is German-American Christians who were living in the United States at the onset of war. Despite historical divisions among the diverse

39 Shepherd, 283.
40 Shepherd, 283.
41 Lettie Gavin, *American Women in World War I: They Also Served* (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1997), 141.
42 Gavin, 209.
43 Thwing, 157.
44 Gavin, 211.

groups of German-American Christians,[45] the challenge facing them was the same, asserting their loyalty to the United States. By late 1917 "many leaders of the German-American population realized that they had to fight back if their identity and institutions were to be preserved."[46] In fact, it was seen that "mere assertions of patriotism or appeals to history meant little ... only the most obvious acts of loyalty, it appeared, could divert suspicion away from German-Americans."[47]

Most churches responded to calls from the German-language press to take action such as buying bonds, donating to agencies such as the Red Cross, participating in patriotic drives, serve on defense councils, and much more.[48] Some pastors also began serving as chaplains in nearby camps.[49] Participating in activities such as these allowed German-Americans to actively identify with the American values which were so closely tied to Christianity and "by summer, 1918, many congregations reported marked improvements in their community relations."[50]

However, there was one noticeable identifying feature that fell victim to the war, the German language. This was largely as result of local pressures and responses were varied depending on how conservative the denomination was and the size of the German ethnic community in a region.[51] While this did represent a significant attack on a portion of their culture, the German churches were, nevertheless, still actively able to live out their faith and appropriate American values to display their loyalty, values which, as noted, were tightly linked to American Christianity.

German-American Christianity did contain one particularly exceptional group though, this was the Mennonites. One of the defining features of Mennonites was their conviction that "no secular power had the authority to force members of their faith to participate in war."[52] This presented a

45 Frederick C. Luebke, *Bonds of Loyalty: German-Americans and World War I* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1974), 34.
46 Luebke, 283.
47 Luebke, 283-284.
48 Luebke, 284.
49 Luebke, 284.
50 Leubke, 286.
51 Leubke, 287.
52 Alyn JohnParish, *Kansas Mennonites During World War I* (Hays: Fort Hays Kansas State College, 1968), 3.

particular challenge upon the passing of the Conscription Act.[53] Mennonites were thus forced to consider how to enact their nonresistant principles. Some Mennonite groups asked for complete exemptions from service within the military establishment, some were willing to accept a compromise and work in agriculture, industry, or the Red Cross, but still outside military jurisdiction.[54] Many leaders began to contact the government, seeking clarifications on what sorts of exemptions would be provided, but they were often given vague statements by those they corresponded with.[55]

The varying negotiations and correspondences continued to be fruitless and the time came for the draftees to report, which many did at the behest of their leaders.[56] However, a new complication arose. The military had waited "until the draftees had begun arriving at camp to inform the Mennonites that noncombatant service could not be performed outside of the military ... [and] that the ministers had no authority over the nonresistant position of the men in camp."[57] Mennonite leaders continued to pressure for work to be allowed outside the military establishment, but "the pleading of Mennonite leaders only led to frustration."[58] By early 1918, more liberal Mennonite sects began to look more favourably on noncombatant service that was under the military arm.[59]

Mennonite fortunes began to change around mid 1918 when "it was becoming apparent that there would be a shortage of labor, especially farm labor, in the summer."[60] There was also a feeling in the War Department "that the conscientious objectors, who were contributing nothing to the military effort, might be able to help alleviate the labor shortages in agriculture."[61] The passage of the Furlough Act was a turning point for the Mennonites as the act allowed men to be granted furloughs to engage in civil occupations, a provision all major Mennonite sects worked towards for their men, even if they

53 Parish, 26.
54 Parish, 26.
55 Parish, 27.
56 Parish, 29.
57 Parish, 31.
58 Parish, 32.
59 Parish, 32.
60 Parish, 32.
61 Parish, 32.

were still technically in the military while doing the civilian work.[62]

In the Mennonite story the sellout view, or at least derivatives of it, have appeared in scholarship because of their acceptance of work while under the military establishment.[63] This is incredibly naive though and even appears to a blatant misrepresentation of nonresistance and pacifism as equivalent positions. The activist work by Mennonite leaders to seek out noncombatant work for their men shows how strong the Mennonite nonresistance conviction was, even when faced with a non-cooperative government. The middle ground position is perhaps, once again, the best descriptor of the Mennonite position, even if just in a relative sense considering the noncombatant stance of it's members. Their willingness to serve the country's greater good, while not compromising one of the basic tenants of their faith, serves as a testament to this.

Overall, while the war certainly inspired militant sellout rhetoric from some Christians, this was not the norm. Rather, Americans let their faith shape how they viewed the war, accepting it as a part of their divine mission to share what were seen as Christian, and thus American, ideals such as freedom and democracy with the world. Christians were actively engaged in the war through faith-based organizations and social programs such as those provided by the FCC and the spiritual needs of the soldier was taken care of by chaplains to ensure the Christian ideals for the war remained pure. A conviction that the ideals being fought for were inherently Christian allowed Americans to openly the war, a fact that allowed Southern groups and German-Americans to find their place in the larger fabric of American society. Even Mennonites, who were perhaps the most challenged by the war, were able to maintain tenants of their faith and render service towards the greater ideals presented by providing civilian work. The war presented a great challenge to Protestants living in the United States and Protestants responded by shaping the war in lieu of their religious convictions.

62 Parish, 32-33.
63 Parish, 55.

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