ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Religion in the Civil War

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As Abraham Lincoln stated in his second inaugural address on March 4, 1865, both sides prayed to the same God and read the same Bible. Indeed religious language, imagery, and ideas were pervasive during the Civil War era. By 1855, it was estimated that over 4,000,000 out of a population of 27 million were members of some Protestant church. This was did not take into account more than two million Roman Catholics, a small but growing Jewish population, and the millions of Americans who never formally joined a church but attended services with some regularity.

Not only were Americans a highly religious people--especially in the aftermath of the Second Great Awakening--but their religious beliefs mattered a great deal. Many people experienced a powerful sense of divine providence--interpreting the ordinary events of life as somehow reflecting the divine will. At least since the American Revolution, a civil religion that took an often worshipful view toward the American republic had powerfully shaped public life. There was a strong belief that the story of America was a part of a larger story of human history, an unfolding of a providential design. Mere mortals could at times catch a glimpse of this larger meaning, but human history both in its long sweep and messy details remained in the Lord's hands. Such God talk was commonplace in private life and often in public life.

It should hardly have been surprising, then, that many Americans would use their religious beliefs, and especially ideas about providence, to interpret and understand both the sectional crisis of the 1850s and the Civil War itself. Civil War historians have generally failed to incorporate religion into their larger narratives, yet it was probably the "holiest" war in American history. In religious terms the sectional crisis of the 1850s and secession were often seen as the Almighty's punishment for both individual and collective sins. Virtually all religious groups embraced this interpretation of the national crisis. Less than a month after the firing on Fort Sumter, a leading Quaker weekly observed that "national sins, unless repented of, are always punished by national calamities." Even Unitarians talked of the nation approaching "Pentecostal days."

But if the war was seen as a divine judgment on the entire nation, many questions remained about God's purposes and how to discern them. Believers who held that the Lord was simply punishing people's sins came up with a long list of individual and collective transgressions. Perhaps slavery, political corruption, partisanship, or greedy

materialism had provoked the Almighty's wrath. But just as often preachers cited Sabbath-breaking, profanity, drunkenness, and gambling as grievous offenses. Such broad definitions crossed ideological and sectional lines; there was not necessarily a conservative emphasis on individual sin or a reformist emphasis on collective sin. Some abolitionists, for example, might rail almost as strongly against alcohol as they did against slavery. More generally, Northern clergy emphasized the sinfulness of the rebellion with suitable biblical citations.

Despite a good deal of sectional overlap, there were some distinctive Confederate themes. Polemicists drew a striking contrast between the "godless" Federal Constitution and a Confederate constitution that invoked the favor of almighty God. Indeed there latter developed a brief and unsuccessful campaign to add some acknowledgement of God or even Jesus Christ into the United States Constitution. At the same time, some Confederates argued that the nation was being punished for Yankee political preaching. Yet virtually all Southern clergy defended slavery (and eventually rallied to the cause of disunion), though some acknowledged that slaveholders had fallen short of Biblical standards in dealing with their slaves.

Religious voices, whether Union or Confederate, seldom expressed much doubt that God was on their side. Although pious young men and their families sometimes asked whether a child of God could be a soldier, most churches and clergy answered with a decided "yes." The opening prayer of a New York Methodist conference came right to the point: "We ask Thee to bring these men [the rebels] to destruction, and wipe them from the face of the country." Writing to his brother, a Southern Methodist minister matched this bloodcurdling rhetoric: "It is a righteous war. I feel a deep christian and inextinguishable hated toward the demons of the North who would desolate my country and destroy its liberties. It is doing God's service to kill the diabolical wretches on the battlefield." Quakers, Mennonites, and other peace churches often maintained their witness against war but did so circumspectly, largely by seeking exemption from conscription. Quaker editors did not go so far as to advise tax resistance and several acknowledged that many young people had become caught up in the war excitement and that a number of young Quaker men had actually enlisted in the army.

Given these assumptions, the ministers and laity alike naturally used the Bible, church teachings, and their own faith to explain the course of the war. Notions of providence, the idea of war as punishment for sin, and warnings of divine judgment all became powerful and flexible ideas with which to interpret wartime events. Religion provided comfort to the anxious and grieving, but also offered rationalizations for suffering and anguish, for victory and defeat. Battles and their results became signs of divine intent, a pattern of thought that began with the First Battle of Bull Run and continued throughout the war. There was an assumption at the beginning of the war that the Lord would safeguard the righteous in battle but that idea was immediately called into question. Indeed printed sermons eulogized Christian soldiers who faced death fearlessly and looked forward to reunion with their loved ones in heaven. Letters sent home by chaplains and other officers along with countless articles in the religious press reported

the last words of soldiers declaring their faith during their final moments on earth. Nor did the deaths of these fine young men—whether from wounds or more often from disease—seem to shake people's faith in God's sovereignty. As the Reverend Edward Reed told his rural South Carolina congregation shortly after the Confederate victory at Manassas, "Not one of these brave men has fallen, or suffered, without His [God's] permission."

This was hardly a surprising sentiment in an era during which people believed that every death and every illness somehow conformed to God's will. Some folks believed that the Lord chose the fields of combat, supplied courage to the soldiers, and even controlled the timing of troop movements and tactical maneuvers. The smallest incidents became signs of divine favor: people praying fervently back home for the men in a company who emerged from a battle largely unscathed; or even more commonly the many accounts of pocket testaments stopping bullets.

Defeats naturally required a different theological interpretation. After First Bull Run, the nation's leading Methodist newspaper, the *Christian Advocate and Journal* in New York agreed that defeat had been "doubtless ordered by Providence as part of a severe but wholesome discipline, which in the end . . . will cure some desperate evils that have existed among us." Typically, following every major battlefield loss the defeated side attempted to figure out which sins had stirred up God's wrath. Perhaps fighting on the Sabbath, though soldier swearing and alcohol use also came in for closer scrutiny. African-American clergy warned that the nation was being punished for the sin of slavery. Many abolitionists of both races argued that God would allow the bloodshed to continue until African slavery was banished from the nation.

Throughout the war, denominations, churches, and individuals - North and South, agonized and argued over the role of slavery in the conflict. Religious folk of various stripes had long debated whether God opposed, sustained, or was indifferent to slavery, and the war reshaped the discussion in both sections. In the Northern states, by the fall of 1862 even the more conservative denominations were coming to see the death of slavery as a military if not a moral necessity. The North would not win so long as the nation clung to what one minister term the Jonah of slavery. Even pacifist Quakers argued that God was using the war to punish the nation for the sin of slavery. Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation led ministers of both races to invoke the Exodus story or even talk of the imminent return of Christ; talk of a coming millennium was fairly commonplace throughout the war. The biggest exception to this pattern was the Roman Catholics who still insisted that abolition was a dangerous, radical ideology and that the principles that had kept the Catholic church together could have prevented the war. Catholic editors in fact argued that war represented the logical culmination of schismatic Protestant principles.

Southern churches remained largely united behind the Confederacy and slavery. Loyal Confederates refused to see the war as a punishment for the sin of slavery, but as the war dragged on and the casualties mounted, defending slavery grew more

complicated. Church associations and ministers readily conceded that even though slavery was sanctioned by the scriptures, the behavior of many slaveholders fell short of biblical standards. Reformers called for the legal recognition of slave marriages and laws prohibiting the breakup of families through sale. The implicit promise of course was that the adoption of such reforms would win God's favor on the battlefield, though significantly the proposed measures got nowhere with the politicians

The continuance of the war itself and especially the mounting casualties and suffering on the home front seemingly challenged a providential view of the war's course. Yet because human beings at best could achieve only an imperfect understanding of God's will and because Biblical history proved that the Lord had often used heathen nations to punish his stiff-necked chosen people, even by 1864, Federals and Confederate alike had hardly abandoned their civil religion. The devout in both sections continued to believe that God was on their side - however inscrutable his purposes might often appear. Of course the horrific bloodletting at places such as the Wilderness, Spotsylvania Courthouse, Cold Harbor, and Petersburg might readily lead war-weary soldiers and civilians to speak of pointless sacrifices. It seemed logical enough for the clergy to assert that the war had spun out of human control yet each victory rekindled hope of divine favor and defeats could still be explained in terms of divine chastisement - the kind of spiritual discipline for those whom God loved. In the fall of 1862, Georgia Methodist Bishop George F. Pierce had sounded a Lincolnesque note and could not chase away a deep sense of foreboding:

> We are in the Lord's hands, and I know not what he means to do with us. In many respects the prospects before us are dark. We have wrought wonders, but seem to have gained nothing. The war is without a parallel in the past, as to its origins, its battles, its progress, and its results so far. I hope for the best, but I am looking to God alone - vain is the help of man.

But to what extent did soldiers interpret the war's course in terms of providential history? There were widespread reports of indifference to religion in the armies on both sides early in the war. "No Sabbath in the army," was a phrase that cropped up repeatedly in soldier letters, and the prevalence of profanity and drinking suggested that the pious remained an embattled minority. Of course young men in their teens and twenties are often resistant to religious appeals even when they are facing the threat of death. Both sides had made only minimal provision for chaplains and had even reduced their pay during the war. There never were enough good chaplains to meet the need, and so spiritual life often appeared to languish in the camps. But by 1862 the first reports of revivals appeared, especially among the Confederates. The hope became that mass conversions might win divine favor and became a cause for renewed optimism. Christian soldiers were supposedly more effective soldiers, but ministers and many of the men themselves readily avowed that individual salvation was the first priority. Soldiers

could sometimes sound like ministers in discussing the hand of God in battle, but they also emphasized the importance of religion as a source of comfort. Soldiers and civilians talked of heavenly reunion with their families - a reunion that took place regardless of which side won the war. Likewise, the war had a devastating impact on church membership and activities, so the state of home front religion became a constant concern for both sides throughout the war.

As prayers increasingly focused on individual rather than national salvation, soldiers and civilians could readily believe that peace would only come in the Lord's good time. Perhaps Union and Confederacy had not yet been punished enough. And of course ministers on both sides warned against the sin of murmuring against the civil authorities, military commanders, and against God. Devout Confederates, as they stared into the face of defeat, might still affirm that God would save even if their nation would not be saved. For Federals as the war neared its end, it seemed that the Lord had finally smiled on their cause. The day after the news of Richmond's capture arrived in Washington, D.C., the Capitol was brightly illuminated. A gas-lighted transparency was emblazoned with the message: "This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes." But in 1865 the forces of the modern world and its relentlessly secular tendencies were already putting great strains on this providential world view.

Only a month before, Abraham Lincoln had offered the ultimate meditation on divine purpose in his Second Inaugural. Throughout his political career, Lincoln had refused to render harsh judgments against Southerners. Throughout the war, he had refused to automatically equate the Union cause with God's larger purposes and even in the spring of 1865 never yielded to the temptation of triumphalism. Lincoln somehow rose above many (though hardly all) of the pious clichés so popular in the North and in the South. He noted how both sides had not expected the war to last so long or be so bloody. "Each looked for an easier triumph . . . The prayers of both [sides] could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully." His key point emphasized divine sovereignty in the conflict: "The Almighty has His own purposes." If slavery was such an offense to God that the war had to continue, and that both the North and South had to endure, then Lincoln could only conclude in the words of Psalm 19, "The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

But of course that was a very hard affirmation to make in the spring of 1865, because by that time more than 600,000 had lost their lives. Could their friends and families simply say, "Thy will be done"? The Union victory and Confederate defeat left many hard questions about providence and role of God in human history unanswered as Lincoln himself readily acknowledged. And of course the whole idea of unanswered questions would deal a body blow to providential interpretations of history, and never again would an American war be interpreted in such openly religious terms.

Less than two months after offering his mediation on the war's meaning, Lincoln himself would fall victim to an assassin's bullet. Was Lincoln's assassination a providential event? Many people at the time thought so, and indeed countless sermons

compared the martyred president to Moses who also had been able to glimpse but not enter the Promised Land. Many ministers struggled to fathom both the meaning of the President's death and the war's outcome.

The exodus of African Americans from the Southern churches and success of African Methodist Episcopal Church missionaries in the Southern states marked one of the most important religious consequences of the Civil War. Religion of course played an important role in the cult of the Lost Cause, though devout Southerners of both races were far more interested in evangelism and rebuilding their churches than in the politics of the Reconstruction era. Indeed orthodox ideas about providence, sin, and judgment continued to resonate with countless Americans for many years after Appomattox.

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