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Conservative Christianity, the Military, and American War Culture

Abstract

This article describes the fundamentalist Christian movement in America and how it is closely linked to a strong support of military action and power.

Conservative Christianity, the Military, and American War Culture

By Anna Deters

In March 2003, the foreign minister of Belgium, Louis Michel, expressed a concern that Christian fundamentalism was an increasingly influential force in Washington, D.C. In early April, German President Johannes Rau reacted with displeasure to press reports that George W. Bush, an evangelical Protestant, believed that “Operation Iraqi Freedom” was willed by God and that the overthrow of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein was part of a divine plan.¹ Invoking guidance from “the loving God behind all of life and all of history” and notifying Americans that “we are in a conflict between good and evil,” Bush was not original in his reasoning or his rhetoric.² Rather, his sense of holy military might and divine justification was merely a perpetuation of Christian fundamentalism and its cultural influence on the armed forces and the history of war in America.

Even before Christian fundamentalism became known under that term, it was insinuating a relationship with the United States military. The espousal of the two took place in the 19th century, when both institutions established their roots. While the armed forces cultivated their traditions in an era of Protestant fervor, the Civil War provided the perfect conditions for revivalists. As Margaret Bendroth wrote, “Young Men’s Christian Associations and the United States Christian Commission brought evangelical Christianity to the battlefields and launched not a few careers.”³ Composed during this period and emblematic of the combination of conservative Christianity and military-mindedness was the “Battle Hymn of the Republic.” The striking lyric, “As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,” resounds as a popular motif throughout American history. No less, the imagery of “His terrible swift sword,” “circling camps,” and God “marching on” unites the Protestant God with the United States military in a time of war.

What further entwined Christian fundamentalism and the United States military was an interesting social/religious phenomenon known as the Men and Religion Forward Movement of 1911 and 1912. The movement promoted “Muscular Christianity,” the idea that the religion is “essentially masculine, militant,” and “warlike,” as Fred B. Smith, an advocate of the movement, described it in 1913.⁴ Men wanted to regain the moral and religious territory they had lost to women during the 19th century, and to do so, they had to “extend the influence of a manly, vigorous Christianity throughout society.”⁵ The organized movement slowed and was forgotten by mainstream America soon after the number of men involved in the church was at a respectable level, but the ideologies pressed in the 1910s germinated in Christian fundamentalism and have since thrived.

“The masculine qualities of competitiveness and aggressiveness . . . play prominent roles in fundamentalist life,” wrote one scholar.⁶ The most famous proponent—almost to the point of personification—of these qualities was Billy Sunday, the professional baseball player-turned-evangelist. Sunday preached that Christians should be “militant as well as persuasive” and “fight as well as pray.”⁷ Sunday displayed the fundamentalists’ penchant for military metaphors. His ser-

mons incorporated martial hymns like “Onward Christian Soldiers” and the “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” and he often compared faith to “a warrior invading an enemy’s country.”⁸ “A significant element of this militancy,” wrote Bendroth, “was generated in the masculine persona that fundamentalists identified as the true hallmark of the Christian warrior.”⁹ In the same vein, Patrick Arnold, a writer on men’s issues, claimed, “The warrior is one of the most important archetypes in masculine spirituality”¹⁰

Fundamentalist groups and the military also share a commonality in the reasons for male membership. The men’s religious movement was about men supporting men, comradery, the distancing from femininity, and the joining together to fight for a common cause. As a Congregationalist minister wrote in 1911, men’s “fellowship must be based upon their service in and their devotion to a common cause.”¹¹ Similarly, the military was “a model of male association and bonding and of manly values,” fulfilling many of the goals of the men’s religious movement.¹² Service in the military, like service in the church, “simplified the matter of identity” for men.¹³

The opportunity for male bonding was used by both the military and conservative Christian groups to recruit, retain and motivate men toward their causes. Bill Bright, one ambitious evangelist, founded Campus Crusade for Christ in the 1960s in order to promote “aggressive evangelism” and “brotherhood.” The organization, in pursuit of masculine men, set out to recruit college athletes and fraternity members. Another of Bright’s motives was to counter the new wave of liberal thought and activity that was making a scene on college campuses. Campus Crusade was “consciously designed to counter student unrest,” and interestingly enough, designed “to quash collegiate antiwar activism.”¹⁴ Bright went on to become a leading member of the Promise Keepers, a conservative men’s religious group developed in the 1990s. At one of the Promise Keepers annual conventions, the organization distributed a book entitled, *The Masculine Journey*, authored by Robert Hicks, a military chaplain in the Air National Guard. In it, Hicks wrote,

I have known many former military personnel who, as committed Christians, still yearn for the *esprit de corps* they experienced in secular military settings. Somehow the church has not been able to create a Gideon’s Three Hundred, or a David’s Thirty, or the Twelve of Christ.¹⁵

Hicks implied the necessity of comradery in the lives of men, and while the church should provide opportunities for fraternal bonding, the military could serve as an equally rewarding alternative.

While men and masculine qualities serve as a strong link between conservative Christianity and the military, the two groups share an observable value that unites them in a grand common cause – nationalism. Whether displayed by Billy Sunday waving the American flag from his pulpit or the Promise Keepers’ emblem of three hands raising a flagpole “Iwo Jima style,” “American nationalism plays a significant role in the fundamentalist worldview.”¹⁶ The onset of World War I particularly inflamed religious/nationalistic fervor. According to Leo Ribuffo, in *The Old Christian Right*,

. . . fundamentalists capitulated to “100% Americanism.” The label “made in Germany” was stamped on the bottom of Hell,” Billy Sunday declared, but the United States, Baptist John Roach Straton observed, represented the “ark of the covenant of humanity’s hopes.”¹⁷

The nationalistic sense that the United States represents good and its foes evil pushes into a realm of religion heavily endorsed by fundamentalists. Such simplistic dualism, which has become a pervasive theme in American war propaganda, made it clear that battle must ensue, for “defense of true Christianity seemed more necessary than ever.”¹⁸ America’s military actions in WWI, according to President Wilson, rested on “nothing but the pure light of the justice of God,” reminiscent of the “glimmer of light which came at Calvary, that first dawn which came with the Christian era.”¹⁹ Congressman James Beck, a graduate of a theological seminary and a great proponent of conservative ideology, “saw Verdun as both Calvary and Gethsemane.”²⁰

World War II repeated the battle between good and evil, and Christian fundamentalism, which had flourished during the 1920s and 1930s, became more explicitly concerned with the events of the time. Gerald B. Winrod, a fundamental evangelist of the 1930s and founder of the *Defender*, a right-wing Christian publication, was convinced that the fate of the United States “lay beyond mortal hands.”²¹ He “delineated God’s miraculous intervention on behalf of American troops, and, citing Isaiah 19, insisted that the United States ‘WILL NEVER COME UNDER THE HEEL OF A FOREIGN FOE.’ ” In 1944 and 1945, the *Defender* published articles such as, “A Prophecy Regarding Poland,” “War Situation Demands More New Testaments,” “God’s Hand in the South Pacific,” and “God’s Hand in American History.”²²

The beliefs Winrod’s *Defenders* of the Christian Faith promoted were not merely extremisms isolated on the fringes of the Christian far right; they permeated civil religion and American society. Radio plays addressing the war declared, “No compromise with Satan is possible . . . Strong in the strength of the Lord, we who fight in the people’s cause will not stop until that cause is won!”²³ President Roosevelt said a prayer at the end of D-Day in which he stated that the war was “a struggle to preserve our Republic, our religion, and our civilization” from the “unholy forces” of the Axis.²⁴ “The grim G.I.,” wrote Edward Tabor Linenthal in, *Changing Images of the Warrior Hero in America*, was “seen as the soldier of the Lord, doing the sordid job of wiping out hideous evil.”²⁵

Wiping out this hideous evil was a crusade, and American soldiers were considered to be both fighting a holy war and departing on an evangelical mission. One Baptist minister declared, “I look upon the enlistment of an American soldier as I do on the departure of a missionary for Burma.”²⁶ Indeed, the World Wars greatly promoted this outlook of the soldier as a spiritual figure. To be in combat was to be canonized, and to be killed was to attain immediate salvation. The soldier arriving on the battlefield was like “Saint Paul . . . after he had his vision of the opening heavens on the road to Damascus,” wrote William C. Dawson, author of *The Glory of the Trenches*, in 1918.²⁷ Like Christ, the doughboys and G.I.s had the opportunity to make the noblest form of sacrifice for the redemption of the

world and themselves. "Sacrifice," wrote Linenthal, "brought the individual immortality, a glorious death ordained by God."²⁸ Hicks wrote, "The warrior must be willing to put his life on the line, in order to accomplish anything worthy of redemption."²⁹ The idea that sacrificial death for a cause results in godly immortality is a tenet of fundamentalist faiths all over the world. "Victorious Christianity," another aspect of the men's religious movements of the early 1900s, emphasized the "power to serve" and the saving impact of self-surrender.³⁰ Even if they do not fall in the line of duty, the soldiers "will find God" and "discover their souls." Ministers claimed that war "made Christians of the soldiers."³¹

The good/evil dualism and warrior spirituality continued with the war in Vietnam, but there was a new emphasis on the justification to kill in the name of God. Perhaps Americans in the midst of a controversial war felt for the first time the need to justify their actions. Walter Capps, a fundamentalist member of the New Right, wrote a book entitled, *The Unfinished War: Vietnam and the American Conscience*. In it, he demanded that God's warriors move past the shelling, the bombing and the foxholes and, with bayonet in hand, encounter the enemy face to face and one-on-one bring them under submission to the Gospel of Christ, move them in the household of God and call it secured.³²

This is evangelism at its most extreme. Fundamentalists fully displayed their stance on the Vietnam War by their reaction to My Lai and the Calley investigation. On March 16, 1968, Charlie Company, Eleventh Brigade, under the leadership of Lieutenant William Calley, entered the village of My Lai, Vietnam on a "search and destroy" mission. By the end of the operation, the eleventh brigade massacred three hundred unarmed civilians. An investigation ensued, and Calley was convicted of murder in September 1969. During the trial, pro-Calley rallies raged throughout the Bible Belt, and at one held in Columbus, Georgia, the Reverend Michael Lord compared Calley to Christ. "There was a crucifixion 2,000 years ago of a man named Jesus Christ," he preached. "I don't think we need another crucifixion of a man named Rusty Calley."³³ This outlook, equating the United States military to an army of God and its lieutenants to Christ, was the main support fundamentalists had for their evangelistic agenda and staunch devotion to the armed forces, which apparently could do no wrong in their eyes.

God's army revels in absolute justification. Hicks wrote that even before he became "born again," he "was biblically aware enough to know that somehow God Himself had sanctioned His people to take human life both in war and via capital punishment."³⁴ "God," he claims, "is not a passive, immobile, unconcerned God who would never lift His holy finger in violence. He is a God who fights . . ." Since God is established as being warlike himself, Christian conservatives assume that "divine authorization gives the power to governments to take life."³⁵ Of course, this divinely authorized power generally does not extend to governments other than the United States and its allies, but it does allow one to "oppose with an easy conscience those who are not with us, therefore not on God's side."³⁶ The military indeed rests assured that God has resolutely sided with America. A prayer posted by the Army Chaplain's Office reads:

Teach us, Lord, to serve as you deserve, to give and not to count the cost, to

fight and not to heed the wounds, and not to seek for rest, to labor, to toil and not to seek for any reward, save knowing that we are doing your will.³⁷

During the Cold War, the Christian Right had the perfect opportunity to press its interest in strong national defense. The Kaiser's evil had long worn off, as had the ungodliness of the Axis powers, but a new collective Satan was at hand. Beyond the Iron Curtain there lay a fresh evil for America to contain since it could not quash it – communism. Jerry Falwell, perhaps the preeminent fundamentalist of the 20th century, quoted General Lewis Walt, who was assistant commandant of the Marine Corps from 1968 to 1971, when he wrote, “At this moment, you and your loved ones stand exposed to physical destruction. The option of whether you live or die rests primarily with the hardened men who occupy the Kremlin.”³⁸ Falwell, writing in 1980, went on to stress the necessity of military might to answer the threats posed by the Soviets. They “are determined to conquer our free country and to infiltrate the American people with godless communism,” he said. “The security of our country is at stake . . . We must return to a strong program of national defense.”³⁹ Hicks spoke of the same issue, though at a more personal level, when he encouraged American men to “embrace the latent or rejected warrior within . . . for the sake of our society and the Church.”⁴⁰ In fundamentalist thought, the military had gone from the evangelical offensive to a protector of Christian men and women. Falwell wrote:

We must continue to insist that our new government officials provide a strong national defense for our people. Certainly I believe that God can sovereignly overrule the weapons of human warfare. But what Christian parent would refuse an inoculation for his children during a widespread epidemic? Jesus told us not to ‘tempt’ God by placing ourselves recklessly in a position of jeopardy and expecting God to bail us out (Matthew. 4: 6-7).⁴¹

Disarmament, Falwell claimed, would only result in the surrender of American/Christian freedoms and liberties, and, although he had faith that God would prevent any such thing from happening, was just being practical in his desire for strong military defense.

The religious right's main interest in the United States was increasingly explicit – economic and military dominance. “Even a cursory glance at the religious right's political agenda reveals the intense concern with American military and economic superiority,” wrote one scholar.⁴² Jerry Falwell's fundamentalist tracts fit the mold. “America is in serious trouble today,” he complained in 1980. “It has lost its economic and military prominence among the nations of the world . . .”⁴³

Nothing better sums up this brief chronology of Christian fundamentalism's hand in American war than the fact that during the first night of the Gulf War, Billy Graham, yet another prominent evangelist, was present at the White House. On January 31, 1991, President Bush told the nation that Graham, “spoke to us then of the importance of turning to God as a people of faith, turning to him in hope.” Bush went on to say, “One cannot be president of our country without faith in God—and without knowing with certainty that we are one nation under God.”⁴⁴

Just as George Bush's words perpetuate evangelical ideas in American war

culture, the legacy of the Men and Religion Forward Movement lives on. In an article published by the *New York Times* on March 30, 2003, Rod Dreher, a senior writer at the *National Review*, was quoted for his advocacy of religion, masculinity, and the military. Dreher claimed, in the words of the article's author, that "clergymen who oppose the war are spiritually disarming us and that military chaplains supporting the war should be heeded." Chaplains, Dreher said, are "warriors for justice" who should and do ignore "the effete sentimentality you find among so many clergymen today." "This," wrote the author, "is what used to be called 'muscular Christianity.'"⁴⁵

The religious militarism and steely nationalism advanced by conservative Christianity will continue to thrive for as long as fundamentalism stays a major influence in American culture and society. In the fundamentalist mindset, America's adversaries are not "mistaken, miscalculating, misguided or even just malevolent. They are evil."⁴⁶ The American soldier, on the other hand, is "blessed with a sacred power" and basks in the light of God's will.⁴⁷ This preoccupation with divinity makes it easy for those under the evangelical sway to justify any actions taken by the United States and its military. As Billy Sunday once said before getting involved in a fist fight: "Well, I have a commission from God to knock the tar out of you, you lobster."⁴⁸ So too, Christian fundamentalists trust in a commission from God that authorizes aggressive American policy.

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