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Feature Essay

Religion and Faith – the Forgotten Factor of the Civil War

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In 1861, the world's most devout country went to war. Soldiers and civilians alike “read the same Bible, prayed to the same God and invoked His aide against the other.” In the antebellum era, organized faith and religion were easily the most important social and cultural values at work in America. Membership in churches grew from 1 in 15 to 1 in 7 Americans. The Second Great Awakening had led to the most prolific period of church growth in world history after the 1st century. Even the non-religious Abraham Lincoln said to an aide, “take all of [the Bible] upon reason that you can, and the balance upon faith, and you will live and die a happier and better man.” Though not a “war of religion,” America's Civil War truly was a religious war.

Yet today, the role that religion and faith played for the average soldier is unknown to most Civil War aficionados. The life and battles of Civil War soldiers are re-enacted precisely, written about thoroughly, discussed passionately, argued endlessly – yet faith is generally ignored. But religion and faith indeed enflamed, instigated and even help caused our deadliest American conflict.

First, Civil War soldiers came from a deeply religious country. From its beginning, the United States was awash in a sea of faith, with religion playing an immense role in the founding of our states and country. Religious dissident Pilgrims, Deist Enlightenment founders, and Great Awakening preachers all were powerful shapers of the Revolutionary Era culture which birthed the Civil War generation. One French visitor to America said that religion was “the foremost of the political institutions” in early America.

As the Civil War began, this had not changed, and because of the Second Great Awakening, America had become a society rampant with religious beliefs and attitudes. No antebellum group had as much power to regularly influence the number of citizens as American clergy did. As George Marsden aptly says, “American history recounted without its religious history is like Moby Dick without the whale.”

Second, America's first moral encounter was the slavery issue. A moral “Great Paradox” lay at the roots of America's founding - the development of both race-based slavery and ideals of “liberty and freedom for all” at the same time. In 1787, the Founders consciously marginalized the contentious slavery issue so that the 13 colonies could agree and sign our Constitution. Yet in just 50 years, the deceptive compromise of this “Great Paradox” led to a huge moral impasse, bringing about enormous divisions which demanded a horrible price for their eventual resolution. Its cost was the death of 623,000 Union and Confederate soldiers to harvest the bitter fruit of America's tree of liberty – all because of the Founders' one unresolved moral issue.

- MO senator Thomas Hart Benton compared the unceasing prewar conflict over slavery to ancient Egypt's plague of frogs. “You could not look upon the table but that there were frogs, you could not sit down at the banquet but there were frogs, you could not go to the bridal couch and lift the sheets but there were frogs!” It was the same way with “this black question, forever on the table, on the nuptial couch, everywhere!”

Third, the Bible helped cause the Civil War. Postwar veterans recalled one soldier on a Richmond battlefield who died with his hand resting on these words of Psalm 23 - "Thy rod and staff they comfort me." In 1861, the Bible was America's most read and valued book. Printed and imported in massive quantities during the War, soldiers on both sides read and carried the Scriptures in many forms. In a predominantly Calvinist America, the Bible was truly the national book *par excellence* - and yet in the 1840s it became the cause of a deadly moral and theological crisis.

The main issue was this - just how literally are the words of the Bible to be interpreted by believers? And specifically, how literally should passages about slavery be interpreted? The Bible's words about slavery - and how scholars and clergy in the North or South interpreted them - caused an immense theological controversy in a very religious America. Not only was the Bible unable to provide clear guidance in our country's most difficult time, but it actually helped divide the United States even more.

- One previously skeptical Confederate surgeon came to a chaplain to ask for prayer, saying he'd finally become a believer. He had noticed a clear difference between the deaths of believers and unbelievers, finally pulling out and reading a little-used Bible his mother had given him, seeking answers. He told the chaplain "I came here tonite resolved to accept publicly the invitation of the Gospel ... Oh that I had submitted my stubborn heart to God years ago! I thank God that I am spared to bear testimony tonite that Christ is able and willing to save the worst of sinners."

Fourth, pre-war denominational divisions paved the way for national division. As a devout country divided economically and socially, it also grew farther apart religiously. By 1845, the red-hot rhetoric over slavery had caused splits in America's three largest religious denominations (Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians) - all in essence over the contentious issue of slavery or non-slavery. Their divisions paved the way for the decisions of 1860 - since 94% of the South belonged to one of those three denominations.

Soldiers went into militias and military camps fired up with religious rhetoric and fiery sermons - which rationalized their motives (Southern or Northern), and inflamed their sectarian biases. Battle flags and cannons were consecrated by prayer. Confederate Bishop-General William Pendleton even named his four artillery pieces "*Matthew, Mark, Luke and John!*" Troops were blessed before leaving on trains, and several "Preacher's Regiments" were even formed. On both sides, but in the South especially, clergy led the way into the War.

- Henry Clay - not a practicing Christian most of his life - joined the Protestant Episcopal Church in 1847. His final years were devoted to efforts of pacification and compromise. Clay seems to have brooded frequently over the political consequences of church schisms. Before his 1852 death, he said "I tell you, this sundering of the religious ties which have hitherto bound our people together, I consider the greatest source of danger to our country. If our religious men cannot live together in peace, what can be expected of us politicians, very few of whom profess to be governed by the great principles of love?"

Fifth, the greatest morale-booster for soldiers was their faith in God. In March 1865, Col. Samuel Walkup (48th NC) lamented the long odds facing the Confederate cause – “The sea before us, the mountains on each side, behind us a mighty and desperate enemy. Where can we look for help but upwards.” Indeed, during the deadly War, it was religion more than any other factor which increased soldiers’ capacity to endure the conflict and battle stress that raged around them. Religious faith strongly motivated the attitudes of an enormous number of soldiers —as many as three-quarters took faith very seriously, by one estimate.

Although there were never enough, Civil War chaplains labored valiantly for soldiers - the best ones becoming jacks-of-all-trades ministering to a wide variety of needs both spiritual and material. Non-ordained colporteurs distributed religious literature. Bibles in many forms were carried and used by soldiers. Religious services were held as regularly as possible, given the unexpected demands of army life. One southern soldier spoke of the key role faith played during the Civil War: “religious sanction was demanded by the righteous, approved by the lukewarm, and tolerated by the wicked. All felt better to have had the blessing of the church.”

Sixth, perhaps half of all soldiers were touched by war-time revivals. By 1863, the Civil War had lasted longer and been far more deadly than anyone had expected. Horrendous battles like Shiloh and Antietam only led to more battles, without an end in sight. Thus, “driven to their knees by the realization that they had nowhere else to go,” it was no surprise that an immense religious revival broke out. Soldiers North and South, black and white, Eastern and Western theaters, were affected. These intense revivals caused a huge surge in attendance at religious services, with thousands of soldiers formally converting and joining “the Lord’s army” for the first time, including such wartime converts as McClellan, Bragg, Ewell, Hood, Cheatham, Joseph Johnson and Jefferson Davis.

Bloody battles like Gettysburg led to even greater numbers of conversions, as one soldier testified - “I never prayed until last night; when I saw that [Christian] man die so happy, I determined to seek religion too.” A strong argument can be made that these Confederate revivals actually extended the War another year – so strong was the uplifting effect of faith upon their morale in the desperate last days of the War. Historian Steven Woodworth aptly remarks - “after they began in 1863, rest of Civil War was really one long revival, interrupted occasionally by military operations.”

Seventh, a “religious army” supported Civil War soldiers in many varied ways. Whether Union or Confederate, official army bureaucracies could never meet all the soldiers’ needs. As soldiers wrestled with loneliness, boredom in camp, terror on the battlefield, and anguish in hospitals, it was churches and religious groups who stepped in to provide for them. Through two well-organized Northern religious groups - the Christian Commission and Sanitary Commission - food, fresh vegetables, lending libraries, medical aid, religious materials, church services and more reached nearly all Union troops.

In the Confederacy, with churches greatly disrupted by the war, more localized and limited efforts prevailed. Civilian and church aid societies supported Confederate troops with clothing and blankets made by local women, artificial limbs, ambulances, religious literature, colporteurs, orphanages, care for orphans, and support for needy families. In all, an amazing variety and broad system of support flowed out to Civil War troops – with religious-inspired financial giving and charity (\$212 million in the North alone by 1864, in one estimate) making a significant difference in the conditions of many soldiers.

- Catholic nun-nurses had a tremendous impact upon many Protestants. CSA chaplain Fr John Bannon was ministering to a badly wounded Confederate at Vicksburg who refused to believe him until the nun caring for him confirmed he was correct! The soldier then said to Bannon, ““Very well, all right. Go ahead, Mister, what’s next’.” Bannon wrote “In the end I baptized him, although it may be said that perhaps it was rather in fidem Sodorum [in the faith of the nuns] rather than in fidem Ecclesia [in the faith of the Church].”

Finally, religion played a major post-war role among soldiers and in society. When the War ended, the South was physically and socially devastated, the Confederacy was dead, and former slaves were adrift in a new world. In these difficult days, as happens so often in history, religion and faith stepped in to fill the social and spiritual gaps. It was the Southern clergy and churches who breathed credibility and power into that Confederate post-war remembrance known as the “*Lost Cause*” – that broad, over-arching social attitude and “selective remembering” which justified Southern defeats, emphasized moral victory over military defeat, and promoted traditional Southern values and identity. As one author half humorously said, the Lost Cause meant that the Southern soldier was “holier, braver, purer, nobler, tougher, and a better shot than his Yankee counterpart.”

It was the clergy and churches who empowered the meteoric post-war rise of black churches and educational institutions – making one of the clearest and long-lasting results of the Civil War black religious self-determination. By 1900, though their population had only doubled, black church membership quintupled – with 2.7 million blacks (out of 8.3 million) belonging to some church, and many more merely affiliated somehow.

Finally, the overheated denominational passions of the war gave birth to a unique post-war phenomenon which continues today – a non-sectarian American civil religion. In this “secular” religion, a man like Abraham Lincoln became a “messiah”, the “deity” was National Unity, the new “holy days” were Independence and Memorial Days, with the American flag becoming the “sacred symbol” of the country.

In conclusion, a popular image for soldiers in literature and music was that of “Christian soldiers marching as to war.” By 1865, a majority of soldiers had clearly come to see themselves and their causes as under God’s influence and Divine Will in some way. An anecdote illustrating this occurred on Sherman’s famous march through Georgia. As his troops encamped, one regimental band began to play the popular hymn the “Old One Hundredth.” Soon band after band in the Union army picked up the melody, and soldiers everywhere joined in the singing - until 5000 or more soldiers were soon singing “Praise God from whom all blessings flow, praise him above all creatures here below...” Events like this led even the notoriously irreligious Sherman to say “I’ve got a Christian army – noble fellows – God will take care of them.”

Whether Union or Confederate, one of the unexpected “blessings” of a horrible Civil War between brothers was the faith they acquired, and the Religion they practiced. Two million soldiers fought and died, laughed and sang – but they also prayed and worshipped as a “Christian army.” As we study their battles and remember their sacrifices, let us never forget that overwhelmingly many also became men of faith. Both prayed to the same God and read the same Bible. “The prayers of both could not be answered.” As always, the Almighty had “His own purposes.”

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