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War: Religion's Tool to Destroy Itself

Abby Beckman

Human life is sustained through a cycle. Through the process of photosynthesis, plants take in sunlight and carbon dioxide in order to make oxygen. The oxygen release is then breathed in by humans. After a breathing in oxygen, humans breathe out carbon dioxide. In return, plants use that carbon dioxide, plus the sunlight, to start the cycle again. Similarly, religion and war feed off of each other. The relationship between religion and war can be described as cyclical too in that religion can cause destruction, through war, and in return war sometimes destroys religion or redefines society with religion. However, unlike the photosynthesis cycle, the relationship between religion and war is destructive, not productive. This type of relationship can be seen in history through an analysis of wars like the American Indian War, the Civil War, and World War II.

Violence against the natives of the Americas occurred since the first colonization of the Americas around 1540. Specifically, the American Indian War commenced after the pioneer groups, who were traveling from the east to the west side of North America, encountered the Native Americans and attempted to transform their culture; this included their religion. Around 1840, an interest in the West was sparked after a wave of nationalism, caused by the War of 1812, and the Second Great Awakening. Manifest Destiny, a journey rooted in colonial progress, was almost a pilgrimage in that many of the people traveling felt it was God's providence for them to make the land their own. The pioneers who went "believed that America had a divine obligation to stretch the boundaries of their noble republic to the Pacific Ocean" ("Manifest Destiny"). During their travels, they attempted to convert the natives. Many of the pioneers were Christians and believed it to be their duty to convert the native people and deliver them to salvation. Cultures clashed as the pioneers began to control how the natives' society, including their religion, operated, "Missionaries also attempted to control the most intimate aspects of converts' lives, encouraging heterosexuality, monogamy, and Christian marriage while

reinforcing larger cultural ideas about which sexual practices were natural”. Despite the war starting in one religious group’s attempt to eliminate the culture, including the religion, of another group, the ending did not produce this result as many Native Americans did not assimilate to the culture of the pioneers and continue to practice the religion of their ancestors.

Later, tensions began to grow between the North and the South over slavery. Many remember the war being over the legality over slavery. While this might be true, many of the tensions that eventually led to the Civil War were over the morality of slavery as both sides used different interpretations of Christianity to back their opinion. The Southern interpretation was that slavery was not only moral but a Christian obligation. One explanation of their interpretation included the teaching of how labor led to the salvation of both the slave holders and the slaves. This idea was something George D. Armstrong, one of the Presbyterian preachers of the time, often spread to his followers. He wrote that slaves secured “a Christian life on earth and meekness for his heavenly kingdom” through their labors. Many ideologies held within institutionalized religion begin with people who hold power within the institution. This is an important concept because if people of power in Southern Christianity preached that slavery was not only profitable, but moral, then it would have lead Southerners to believe their actions to be religious and not just economic. If the government declared slavery to be illegal, Southerners would have felt that it contradicted their right to practice what they considered to be religion. Thus Southerners felt they should fight the proposition.

On the contrary, Northerners believed slavery was the opposite of what Christianity taught. Thomas Starr King, a Unitarian minister who wanted to claim California for the Union, said the Northern success to be wrong on all fronts, “a geographical wrong, an economical wrong, a moral wrong, a religious wrong, a war against the American Constitution, against the law of the globe, against the New Testament, against God”. The Northern interpretation was rooted in the preaching that all people deserved equality. This view point was expressed in a war song written by Julia Ward Howe which was titled “The Battle Hymn of the Republic”. Northern soldiers would sing Howe’s lyrics as they marched into a battle, “As He

died to make men holy, let us die to make men free” (“Civil War Music: The Battle Hymn of the Republic”). He was a reference to Jesus. As Christians, they believed Jesus to be their freer from sin, savior from hell, and deliverer to salvation. Northerners were, somewhat, comparing themselves to Jesus as they thought of themselves as saving the slaves from the hell they were in. This is important as it would have shown their religious reasoning for taking part in the war. In order to end a war based on religious interpretation, one interpretation of this religion had to prevail over the other within the United States Government. This finally came to fruition when the Northern interpretation redefined the United States laws by making slavery illegal.

Most people know how the second World War and religion are related on the surface, but do not know the aftermath of the war and how it affected the religion of the survivors. Elie Wiesel was one of the prisoners in the concentration camp in Auschwitz. In *Night*, he documented his time during the war. The book depicts his transformation from a devout Jewish boy to a victim of war who doubts God’s existence. It was the awful conditions within the camp and inhumane treatment of his fellow prisoners by the Nazis that led to the break down the faith of Wiesel. The hanging of a young boy is a specific instance of inhumanity that Wiesel detailed in his book. This instance was so outrageous that it caused an immediate denying of faith within Wiesel, “Behind me, I heard the same man asking: ‘Where is God now?’ And I heard a voice within me answer him: ‘Where is He? Here He is- He is hanging here on this gallows...’”. Wiesel was not the only prisoner who began to doubt his faith. He recalled another prisoner struggling and deserting his faith, “He would recite whole pages of the Talmud from memory, argue with himself, ask himself questions and answer himself. And one day he said to me: ‘It’s the end. God is no longer with us’”. Although Wiesel could only give his audience insight into the prisoners at Auschwitz, the quotes give an idea of how the war affected the religion of the Jewish survivors. It can be inferred that the war environment, as created by the Nazis, destroyed the faith of many Jewish people, including Elie Wiesel, who were detained in the concentration camps.

While people were suffering in concentration camps in Europe because of their religion, Japanese Americans were facing discrimination in America. During World War II, Japanese Americans were put in internment camps out of fear that they were conspiring against the United States with Japan. George Takei, a Japanese American actor who was affected by the internment

camps, recounted how his family's humanity was taken away from them as they were relocated to an internment camp, "When we arrived at Rohwer, in the swamps of Arkansas, there were these barb wire fences and sentry towers". Although Japanese Americans were released from the camps, many were still being discriminated against. Takei described the his life after the war, "They would deny us housing. Jobs were very, very difficult. My father's first job was as a dishwasher in a Chinatown restaurant. Only other Asians would hire us".

Under pressure to be accepted, many choose to desert Buddhism and to redefine themselves as Christians, "...some Buddhists converted to Christianity, while others burned Japanese-language books and other personal cultural artifacts in an attempt to destroy, literally and symbolically, their Japaneseness while simultaneously demonstrating their Americanness".

Japanese Americans, of the time, rid their lives of all elements of their religion, in order to feel accepted by the society in which they lived. Although the war did not force them to become Christians, the destruction and rebirth felt like a necessity for a whole group of people to fit in due to left over fear from the war; therefore, it can be viewed as a byproduct of the war.

People may argue that religion was not the main element of these wars. An argument could be made that the American Indian War was a war of economics. The American Indian War was fought over the land, which the pioneers wanted for the fur trade and railroad construction. While this is true, it is important to remember the original reason the pioneers were there. They were there because of Manifest Destiny, a religious movement. Also, many may view the Civil War as a war of politics instead of a war of religion. Slave-owner and abolitionists had different opinions on slavery and politics. Abolitionists felt the act should be illegal while slave-owners thought the government should not interfere with what they believed to be a right of the state. Political passion for the topic stemmed directly from religious passion. Additionally, World War II may be thought of as a revenge to the damage caused by World War I. The Treaty of Paris sent Germany into economic downfall by demanding them to pay a lot of money to the Allied powers. Hitler's rise of power occurred when he began offering the Jewish people as a scape goat for the problem. World War I led to racial and religious discrimination which led to World War II.

Despite the dissimilarities of the various wars, each example had religion as a critical

element. In the American Indian War, Christianity was used by pioneers an attempt to obliterate the culture, including the religion, of the natives and reassemble them as the people they wanted them to be. This did not happen as Native Americans continue to practice their ancient religious practices under laws like the American Indian Religious Act. Although they are allowed to practice their religious beliefs, their way of life remains misunderstood and stereotyped. Similarly, interpretations of Christianity, were used, in the Civil War, as explanations for the North's and the South's stance on religion. The Northern interpretation overcame that of the South by winning the war and outlawing slavery. In World War II, two religious groups, Buddhist Japanese Americans and Jewish Europeans, were affected. After the internment camps in the United States, many Japanese Americans deserted their long-held religion for Christianity. The horrors in the concentration camps led many Jewish Europeans to desert religion altogether. Through an analysis of three wars, the American Indian War, the Civil War, and the second World War, it can be shown that religion can influence war and, inversely, war can influence religion.