

Religion - A Dynamic Force in the Civil War

The Christian religion has incessantly maintained considerable leverage throughout many crucial aspects of American History. While the US was not founded on Christian ideals, it would be inaccurate to state that it wasn't a motivating force. Even dating back to the American Revolution, the Christian doctrine has been used to invigorate and give fervor to both the most basic members of society and leaders that brought about immense changes in America. This sheds light on a point that is often overlooked. The Civil War would be significantly impacted by religion, where both the Union and the Confederacy upheld their Christian identity in the face of their adversary counterpart. To achieve societal fulfillment and support their own cause in the war, both sides took the moral high ground and would cling to the belief that the Abrahamic God worked in their own favor.

To understand the underlying favor Northern America had towards religion, one must look at the 2nd Great Awakening, an event that transpired during the early 19th Century, the time period before the agitation of the Civil War. The 2nd Great Awakening would be defined by charismatic speakers such as Charles Grandison Finney that spoke fervently on the issues of the modern world, most notably, slavery. Camp meetings were held, where preachers poured out their passions and ideas to the common crowd. In fact preachers held so many camp meetings in the areas of New England, that they have famously been called "The Burned-Over District." With this came a surge of membership in the Methodist, Baptist, and Evangelical sects of Christianity, largely Northern Christian movements. The urge to create a God-fearing, perfect world was the initial push for abolishment. Reforms and support for abolitionists would grow amongst the North. The social reform of abolishment was meant to be an extension of heaven on Earth. "God's perfect kingdom" would need to find its way through, and reformations would be the

answer. Politicians who adhered to the common ground of a slave-free America were more popular amongst northern society, due to the 2nd Great Awakening.

The South, however, was also pertinent and sensitive to the doctrines and teachings of Christianity. Mostly, the states would parallel the bible with their ideologies of slavery, for in fact, owning slaves were common practice in the bible. The Southerners did not see any fault from using slaves, as the Old Testament of the Bible would mention slavery and even regulate the prices for which slaves were to be sold. Jesus would never utter any direct recorded criticism towards slavery. Without a doubt, the general argument for slavery would bring division amongst the congregations. An exemplary event would stem from a decision made in 1844, where the Northern Methodist Church held a conference to request Bishop James O. Andrew of Georgia to desist from his duties due to the fact he had slaves. The appeal went through, and in the same year the “Southern Baptist Convention” was formed in result of these actions. Assuredly, this showed that disunion amongst American people would already arise due to different interpretations of the bible. While the North called for equality amongst all men to create a God-fearing nation, the South would recognize a different ideology, where God himself ordained the act of owning another person.

These differences in religious perception amongst Americans allowed disapproval, and general distrust to foment in each opposing side. However, the North would still be adamant on standing with a sole opinion on slavery. As to not upset their southern brethren, extremist ideologies such as the complete emancipation of slaves were not wholly accepted in the North. This can be seen where William Lloyd Garrison would not see the initial fruition of his ideas on the complete abolishment of slavery. Still, the religious debates on the issue slavery amongst the north and the south would be heated, but would not lead to extreme circumstances. No side had

the urge to get rid of their neighboring congregations all in the name of slavery. However, this would prove contrary on the opening days of the Civil War.

Following the declaration of the initial secession from seven states of the Union, the battle of Fort Sumter would take place. Even though only two casualties were reported on the side of the Union, it was a confederate victory. Four more southern slave states would secede and join the ranks of the Confederacy. The Civil War had begun.

Almost immediately, the large religious Protestant bodies in the north of faith called for war. There was no more dilly-dallying on the issue of slavery, and all Northern religious bodies cried out in unison on the sinful nature of slavery. Additionally, the northerners felt that the Union would be last remnants of civilized Christian society and must be preserved. The Northerners would feel that they are struggling more than on behalf of a nation; they were struggling on the behalf of humanity. Likewise, the northern pastors would play upon the Union's role as the Kingdom of God in the upcoming future. The Civil War would be seen as the precursor to Armageddon, the final days of the Earth where Christ would return and create New Jerusalem. "Christian ministers . . . suggested that a Northern victory might prepare the way for the Kingdom of God on earth." (Secondary Source 1) Definitely, the North had strong feelings of divine



Figure 1 "The Triumph Patriotic Poster 1862

intervention. Christ is even portrayed as waving the Union's flag in the 1862 document, inspirationally named "THE TRIUMPH." (Primary Source 1) One Baptist pastor in Philadelphia in 1863 preached his Thanksgiving sermon on claim that the defeat of the rebellion would bring a time that the Founding Fathers of the republic "pictured and dreamed about, and prayed for. It will come with blessings, and be greeted with Hallelujahs; it will be the Millennium of political glory, the Sabbath of Liberty, the Jubilee of humanity" (Primary Source 2 *The War and the Millennium*).



THE WAR AND THE MILLENNIUM.*

"THEY SHALL MAKE WAR WITH THE LAND, AND THE LAND SHALL OVERCOME THEM." — *Revelation* xvii. 14.

THE relation of the present conflict to the Millennium? "A very distant relation," you may say. Can war and the thousand years of warlessness be kindred? Can the bloody feet of battle be shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace? Such is the doctrine of the Word and Providence of God. War is the forerunner of the Gospel, the one who cries, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord!" and what he cries, he does. The

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McClellan removed, Burnside defeated, Hooker defeated, Fremont cashiered, how thick the darkness, how faint the national heart!

Still her purpose failed not. Why? It was the salvation of popular government. The Union must be preserved, not alone because it was essential to our own welfare, but because through its preservation would the divine doctrine of popular government live among men. If America is lost, the world is lost.

Under this chastisement the people accept that other truth—the Identity of Man. God compels them to take this truth, just as very sick persons take very disagreeable draughts, not that they like the medicine, but that they may get well. Only this medicine of God is truly His best of food; the choicest of His gifts to men as men. The Union is the American passion—a passion which no European appreciates. England sneers at it, and, if friendly, looks blank and ignorant at such enthusiasm. "Why this fury for the Union?" "We have had one for two hundred and fifty years, and nobody on either side feels for it an impulse

Figure 2 "The War and the Millennium" Baptist Preacher 1863

The promise of the upcoming millennia of God's Kingdom made the North's actions of attempting to reunite a divided nation much nobler. It made the soldiers' plight desirable, and gave will power to those that fought. "What is it that prompted the men to stand fast in face of a sheet of flying lead . . . ?" Churches empowered men that they were fighting for a noble cause, and were literary soldiers of God. The same divine inspiration that was used in the Crusades was allowed in the Civil War. It was common for soldiers to attend sermon before battle for inspiration and courage, as seen where a largely Irish regiment attends mass before the battle of Bull Run (Figure 3)

Furthermore, the Union believed every victory was derived from an Almighty being. The majority of denominations believed that victory would always come about to the faithful, regardless of any realistic causes. That is wherein the problem lies. The first few years of the Civil War were clunky and did not see its fair shares of victory. Protestant ministers' entreated for a theological explanation as to why the Union suffered from such losses. They finally concluded that this is punishment for allowing slavery to linger in their presence without any action being done to free the slaves. The Protestant ministers referenced the Jeremiad, an Old Testament sermon form, where punishment was enforced upon those who continued to commit sin. "The defeat of the Union armies seemed to be punishment..." The Religious leaders of the time concluded that if the North wanted to see



Figure 3 Union men attending mass

victory, the complete abolishment of slavery would have to be enforced, or else the wrath of the Almighty God would fall upon the North. Furthermore, the Lincoln administration would also see the role of religion as a big impact. Lincoln's extremist policies on abolishment earned him unpopularity when he first stepped on the political platform of the US. However, the gradual evolution of the opinions of the church on the issue of slavery garnered him popular vote and presidential election in 1860. His "radical" opinions on the emancipation of slavery were seen as desirable to the northern society. "Without the evolution of the churches' opinions... it is unlikely that the president could have proceeded as he did" The religious society needed

someone who could clearly voice their opinion, and Lincoln was their answer. His argument for emancipation at the sake of winning the war convinced many others to take upon the righteous task of creating an ideal, slave-free world. The Union was viewed as



Figure 4 "Our Heaven Born Banner" William Baully 1861

God's righteous society under Lincoln, clearly seen in "Our Heaven Born Banner" a painting by William Baully in 1861 where the heavens themselves align to form the Unions flag (Primary Source 3). Most definitely, religion proved itself to be a valuable political force in the emancipation of the slaves, and inspiration in winning the war. Religious leaders and organizations would cling tight to their teachings in order to engender feeling of patriotism, righteousness and boldness in favor of a proclaimed Heavenly Kingdom on Earth. Divine inspiration was an asset to the Union during the Civil War.

CONVENTION TO FRAME PERMANENT CONSTITUTION
FOR
THE CONFEDERATE STATES.

FEBRUARY 28, 1861, TO MARCH 11, 1861.

MONTGOMERY,

Thursday, February 28, 1861—12 o'clock m.

The Congress having resolved itself in Convention, proceeded to consider the report of the Committee on Permanent Constitution; which is as follows, viz:

THE CONSTITUTION OF THE CONFEDERATE STATES OF AMERICA.

We, the people of the Confederate States, each State acting for itself, and in its sovereign and independent character, in order to form a permanent federal government, establish justice, insure domestic tranquillity, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity—to which ends we invoke the favor and guidance of Almighty God—do ordain and establish this Constitution for the Confederate States of America.

ARTICLE I.

Section 1.

All legislative powers herein delegated shall be vested in a Congress of the Confederate States, which shall consist of a Senate and House of Representatives.

Section 2.

1. The House of Representatives shall be composed of members chosen every second year by the people of the several States; and the electors in each State shall be citizens of the Confederate States, and have the qualifications requisite for electors of the most numerous branch of the State legislature.

2. No person shall be a Representative who shall not have attained to the age of twenty-five years, and be a citizen of the Confederate States, and who shall not, when elected, be an inhabitant of that State in which he shall be chosen.

3. Representatives and direct taxes shall be apportioned among the several States, which may be included within the Confederacy, according to their respective numbers, which shall be determined, by adding to the whole number of free persons, including those bound to service for a term of years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three-fifths of all slaves. The actual enumeration shall be made within three years after the first meeting of the [Congress of the] Confederate States, and within every subsequent term of ten years, in such manner as they shall by law direct. The number of Representatives shall not exceed one for every fifty thousand, but each State shall have at least one Representative; and until such enumeration shall be made, the State of South Carolina shall be entitled to choose six; the State of Georgia ten; the State of Alabama nine; the State of Florida two; the State of Mississippi seven; the State of Louisiana six; and the State of Texas six.

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Figure 5 The Confederate Constitution

The South, too, used religion as a key motivation for their own cause. For the South, this “chosen” status of being God’s nation was not only presumed, but also put as God’s will on the Confederate national identity. In fact, the South claimed to be a specifically Christian nation. The new Confederate Constitution, adopted on 1861, officially declared its Christian identity. The Confederacy “invoke(ed) the favor and guidance of Almighty God.” (Primary Source 5 The Confederate Constitution)

The Southern leaders even picked their nations motto as “DeoVindice” which literally means “God will avenge.” Confederate President Jefferson Davis proclaimed that the time had come “to recognize our dependence upon God ... [and] supplicate his merciful protection.” The Southern religious leaders would criticize Northern secularism and their lack of belief of God. Clearly, they believed that the Confederacy was the true Kingdom of God, and were fighting an evil, atheistic nation that suppressed the rights of individual states. Validation for this new nation under God seemed to come with the South’s victory in, 1861in Fort Sumter. In a thanksgiving sermon (Primary Source 6) preached the same day in Richmond, Virginia, at St. John’s Episcopal Church, William C. Butler declared:

God has given us of the South today a fresh and golden opportunity—and so a most solemn command—to realize that form of government in which the just, constitutional rights of each and all are guaranteed to each and all. ... He has placed us in the front rank of the most marked epochs of the world's history. He has placed in our hands a commission which we can faithfully execute only by holy, individual self-consecration to all of God's plans.

The Southern people's minds and hearts turned to their religious leaders, where they interpreted the Bible as being pro-slavery, so in theory, they defended the scripture of God. Confederate soldiers even relied on divine inspiration to uphold themselves. A Confederate soldier even stated how "Sometimes, a few of the fellows would gather in prayer, while the rest of us fought the guns," wrote Confederate soldier William M. Dame. "Several times...we met under fire...we held that prayer hour every day, at sunset, during the entire campaign." Without a doubt, the confederate soldiers also saw that the Abrahamic God, the same professed God of the north, was on their side. Confederate soldiers acted with bravery on the battlefield from invigoration from religious teachings and other external factors. Events like *Pickett's Charge* showed the determination of Confederate troops to achieve victory in the name of the Confederacy upheld by God.

Even while the Confederacy faltered, in terms of resources and men, they stuck true to their mainstream Christian religion and its values to justify their causes of fighting in the Civil War, which was too expel the Northern Secularists from their homeland, defend God's scripture, and create a perfect nation defined by Christianity.

Assuredly, both nations used religion as a motivator, and justification to their cause. Both the Union and Confederacy efficiently employed Christian doctrine to justify their reasons in the Civil War, and give moral to both basic society and the troops on the battlefield. Even after the Civil War, the reconstruction of America was also defined by religion in some sense. The South would radically bash the use of the Emancipation Proclamation, as seen in by the Confederate caricaturist, where a satanic Lincoln is coerced by the devil and signs the proclamation freeing the slaves (Primary Source 7). Clearly, the south felt as if the loss of the war meant the loss of Christian values in

America, and the arise of anti-religious movements. On the contrary, the north saw the victory in the Civil War as a victory given by God. As seen in the Northern painting of Civil War

reconstruction, the North

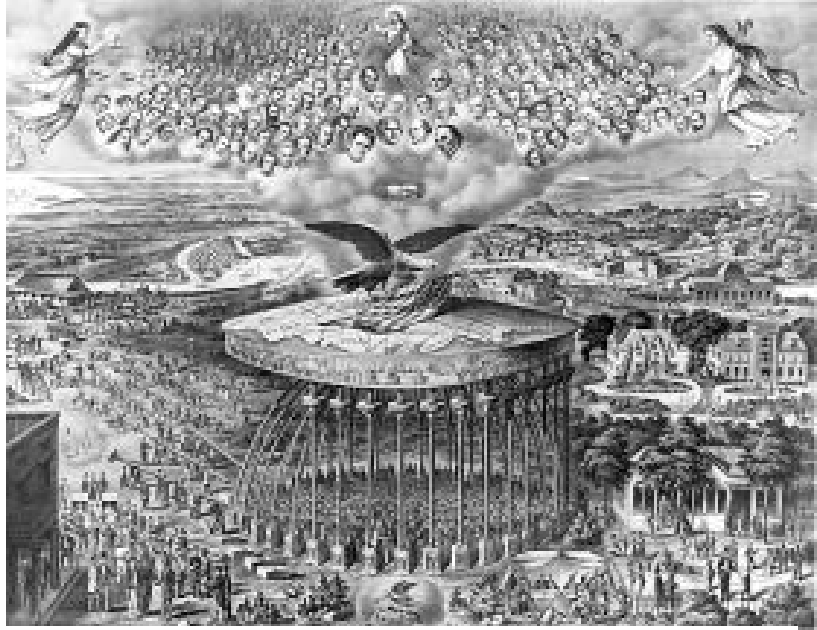
saw the victory as a God-given victory, where Christ was clearly on their side. (Primary Source

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Figure 6 Satanic Lincoln signs The Emancipation Proclamation

Without a doubt, religion played a vital role in the American Civil War. Religion gave divine inspiration and motivation to the troops on the battlefield and the politicians at home. Religion proved to give both societies reason to fight, whether it be protecting God's scripture or giving way for a



Primary Source 4

kingdom of Heaven on Earth. Religion was used as a political force that enforced the belief that God was on either side. As you can see, religion obviously maintained considerable influence in the Civil War.

Primary Sources

1) **"The Triumph,"**

Religious Allegory predicting the triumph of the Union over the Confederacy, 1862

2) **"The War and the Millennium"**

A Thanksgiving Day sermon, 1863, Baptist Preacher

3) **"Our Heaven Born Banner"**

The rifle and bayonet of the Union Zouave sentry serve as the staff of the American flag.

4) **"Reconstruction," 1867**

Union Artist painting

5) **The Confederate Constitution 1861**

6) **1861 Confederate Thanksgiving sermon preached ,Richmond, Virginia**

St. John's Episcopal Church, William C

7) **A Satanic Lincoln Signs the Emancipation Proclamation**

Adalbert Volck, Confederate Caricaturist

8) **Preparing for Battle**

69th Irish Regiment at Sunday morning mass

Secondary Sources

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2) **Ch 23, The American Pageant, Thomas A. Bailey, David M. Kennedy**

Lincoln's Wartime Authority, pg.453

3) **Ch 23, The American Pageant, Thomas A. Bailey, David M. Kennedy**

The Furnace of the Civil War, 1861-1865, pg. 462

