The Coming of the LORD: 
An Analysis of Religious Rhetoric in the American Civil War

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ABSTRACT
Propaganda has always served an important function in warfare. In the American Civil War, much of the propaganda of both the United States and the Confederacy utilized religion or religious rhetoric. A key aspect of the religiosity of both sides in the war was the notion of an all-powerful Providence that guided history as He saw fit, and while it was a powerful source of encouragement early in the war, as the death toll rose, it posed problems for many people, especially Southerners. The sermons and speeches delivered during the war demonstrate that political and religious rhetoric intermingled freely in churches, and show that political leaders eagerly claimed the favor of God on their causes. Each nation’s claims to divine favor reflected distinctive views of God. The Union and Confederacy alike came to define themselves through religion as well as politics, and they defined their opponents in the same ways. The North held itself to be a crusading force, striking down godless rebels who sought to overthrow rightful authority. By contrast, the South portrayed itself as an embattled defender of Christian tradition against invaders who were heretics at best, and infidels with no regard for Scripture at worst.

The United States, being such a vast country, has always had distinctive regional cultures, and by its very nature, the American Civil War brought those differences to the fore, both highlighting and deepening them. Not only were North and South at odds over matters of economics, societal organization, and government, but also over matters of faith. The outbreak of the Civil War, like most wars, led to incredibly nationalistic propaganda on both sides. In a situation in which both the Confederacy and Union were deeply religious, it is unsurprising that religious rhetoric was ever-present in their propaganda. Much has been written about the interaction of religion with the Civil War in general, from the great revival of the Confederate armies to the clash over biblical interpretation.¹ This paper, however, aims to look at a narrower aspect of this topic: the role of religious rhetoric as propaganda in the war.

Religious rhetoric was a fundamental aspect of Civil War propaganda for both the Confederacy and Union, on the home front and in their respective armies. It was used to motivate soldiers to take up arms, to encourage confidence on the home front, to keep up morale, and, eventually, to color perceptions of the war even after it ended. A key aspect of the religiosity of both parties in the war was the notion of an all-powerful

Providence that guided history as He saw fit, and that notion would permeate wartime rhetoric, as well as pose a profound challenge to people’s faith as the war dragged on and more men fell.²

The sermons and speeches delivered during the war are particularly valuable in studying this issue. These serve to demonstrate that political and religious rhetoric intermingled freely in churches, and show that political leaders eagerly claimed the favor of God on their causes with absolute confidence. Each nation’s claims to divine favor reflected distinctive views of God. The Union and Confederacy alike came to define themselves not just through ideological differences, but through the religious rhetoric in their propaganda. The North portrayed itself as a heroic force crushing the rebels against right and good, while the South portrayed itself as a protector of tradition and doctrine.

The Approach of the War

The secession of the Deep South and the formation of the Confederate States of America made the religious differences immediately obvious. The Northern states were far from irreligious. However, the Confederate government went out of its way to claim God’s favor. Where the United States Constitution is a purely secular document, the Confederate Constitution explicitly aligned itself with theism by opening with a preamble similar to that of the U.S. Constitution, but adding the phrase “invoking the favor and guidance of Almighty God.”³ Jefferson Davis, in his inaugural address, invoked divine favor as well, declaring that God would judge who was correct. President Davis suggested that, in the event of war, they could count on Providence to protect them, stating that if “…the integrity of our territory and jurisdiction be assailed, it will but remain for us, with firm resolve, to appeal to arms and invoke the blessings of Providence on a just cause.”⁴ In another speech after the war had begun, Davis echoed this language, stating, “It may be that we shall have to encounter sacrifices; but, my friends, under the smiles of the God of the just, and filled with the same spirit that animated our fathers, success shall perch on our banners.”⁵

Abraham Lincoln, too, utilized religious rhetoric in his inaugural address. However, his tone was less confident than Davis’ certainty of God’s favor. Lincoln used cautious language, saying, “If the Almighty Ruler of Nations, with His eternal truth and justice, be on your side of the North, or on yours of the South, that truth and that justice will surely prevail by the judgment of this great tribunal of the American people.”⁶ Lincoln thus refrained from overzealous declarations while still suggesting that the secessionists were in danger of running afoot of God’s will.

While the presidents invoked God to one degree or another, the religious communities of the Union and Confederacy set about thoroughly sanctifying their causes. In both nations, the clergy took up the cause with zeal, and ministers unabashedly preached politics, proclaiming in apocalyptic terms the righteousness of their cause and the wickedness of their enemy. Still, there were voices of moderation. The Reverend Thomas Atkinson, an Episcopalian bishop and minister at St. James Church in Wilmington, North Carolina, preached that the Confederate cause was just, and argued that the taking of arms was necessary and right. However, he warned the Confederates to look to their own morals, and prepare for a long, difficult struggle that might end in defeat, explaining:

I cannot then doubt, and it seems a singular hallucination that any man should mistake the

righteous cause in this present most lamentable controversy, and I hope and I believe that God will bless with temporal success the righteous cause. He may not, however, for He does not always see fit to make right visibly triumphant. - But succeed or not, it is the cause on the side of which one would desire to be found. Yet, however this thought may cheer us, we cannot disguise from ourselves that success, should we obtain it, will not probably be reached until after an arduous and painful struggle, involving severe trials of the feelings, and of the character of the community, and of ourselves individually.  

Other clergy were less restrained. Ministers on both sides preached sermons with the national cause put forth as the manifest will of God. In accordance with President Davis’ call for a day of prayer, Reverend Daniel Dreher, delivered a sermon in which he declared, “...a just God will hold the offender responsible for the injury done” and condemned Northern leaders as “fanatics” and “inhuman.” The rhetoric sounding the call to arms in the North was hardly less furious. Pastor Henry Bellows thundered to his congregation that:

I wish to know nothing of that kind of religion which will not defend the sacred interests of society, with all the power, physical and moral, which God and nature have supplied. My own enemies I will forgive, and continually turn to them the other cheek; but the enemies of humanity — the enemies of all order, truth, and virtue — the enemies of my country I will not, upon any theory of peace or meekness, unresistingly suffer to achieve their guilty purposes, so long as there is a drop of blood in my heart, a fibre of muscle in my arm, or a note of warning in my voice.  

In addition to the assertion that the interests of the nation and the interests of God were the same, Reverend J.G. Bartholomew, a Universalist preacher, declared the South a wicked enemy of freedom, and claimed that “God calls us out of these events, henceforth to consecrate the Church – its spiritual power, its moral strength, and all it has, to freedom.” Political philosophy and theology mingled freely in these passionate sermons, as many clergy preached politics in the most literal possible sense, making arguments based equally on legal theory and theology.  

**Religion in the Union Camps**

Neither government in the Civil War was averse to using religious rhetoric as propaganda, nor were civilian preachers. However, one should note the different tones struck by each side. Where the Confederates portrayed themselves as defenders of Christian tradition against apostates and infidels, the rhetoric of the Union lent itself towards an aggressive, crusading view that reflected the military situation – Southerners on the defensive, Northerners heading south to defeat them. In the Federal view, the Confederacy was a blight that needed to be stamped out aggressively, for its very existence endangered the Union and American Christianity.

An extremely useful source for insight into the Federal view of the war is the songs sung by the troops, for war songs provide a view into the mind of the soldier and the emotions resonating within him. The most famous of the Union war songs is the classic “Battle Hymn of the Republic.” The Battle Hymn remains popular today and uses apocalyptic imagery taken from biblical prophecy to describe the Civil War as a battle between good and evil, a “fiery gospel writ in burnished rows of steel” and associates the Confederacy with the biblical “Serpent” - Satan - that is to be crushed under the heel of the Union army, which is associated with Jesus, “the Hero

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born of woman.”

War songs were not the only songs sung by the troops, and evangelism-minded Northerners supplied troops with hymn books. Most of the songs contained within these books were hymns that might be heard in church, but they also contained patriotic songs with a martial theme. The rhetoric in these songs is explicit in its association of the Union cause with God’s will. For instance, the song “On- Right Onward” outright calls on the singer to “Strike for Jesus! Strike to-day!”

Equally relevant are the sermons preached to the troops. These sermons reflected a firm belief that the Confederates had committed not only treason against the Union, but also a crime against God. George Whitefield Bosworth delivered a sermon in which he turned to the common theme of the sinfulness of rebellion. He cited a story in the Old Testament, in which the Israelite tribe of Benjamin refused to surrender a criminal. In response, God commanded the rest of Israel to take up arms and march on Benjamin to punish them, a story which Bosworth contended was an almost perfect parallel with the secession of the South, suggesting, “It may be that they [Benjamin] started the question of State rights, and remonstrated against coercion.”

The Old Testament was a recurring theme, as it contains many stories of rebellion bringing punishment. In a sermon to an Ohio regiment, Reverend B.W. Chidlaw was ferocious in his condemnation of the Confederates, calling secession a “Baal” and claiming the civilians of the North were spared harm by God’s divine favor on the Union. Reverend Andrew L. Stone, in 1862, drew a parallel between the secession of the Confederate states and the rebellion of Satan, declaring, “Like the great apostasy in Heaven, ‘a third part’ of the banded stars of the confederacy forsook their loyalty to Union and to law.” By drawing these Old Testament comparisons, an overarching Unionist narrative of the war was formed; specifically, that it was a war against a rebellion which for all intents and purposes was a reenactment of Satan’s original act of evil.

The Sacred Union

One of the themes of Unionist rhetoric was the notion of the Union itself as a sacred thing. The recurring citation of Romans 13, St. Paul’s warning against disobeying legitimate authorities, ties in neatly with this notion, as the Northern clergy preached that secession from the Union was an act of ungodly rebellion. Reverend Edward J. Stearns heavily emphasized this idea in a sermon on the matter. He sought to define St. Paul’s “submission to authority,” and argued that God ordains authority in that He instituted civil government. Stearns defined legitimate authority as those in possession of the “machinery” of civil government, making resisting lawful government a sin.

In a sermon, aptly titled “Unconditional Loyalty,” Pastor Henry W. Bellows went even further, arguing that, as government was divinely sanctioned, it was immoral to obstruct its operation in any way. He argued that “The head of a nation is a most sacred person,” and even that “To rally round the President – without question or dispute – is the first and most sacred duty of loyal citizens.” While few took the doctrine as far as Bellows, the divine ordinance of government and the sinfulness of rebellion

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11Ibid. 105-104
was the defining theme of pro-Union religious propaganda.

In that same vein, Reverend Ezra Williams expounded on the nature of rebellion as fundamentally sinful. Reverend Williams’ sermon was unusually aggressive in tone, but contained several themes common to Union religious propaganda – the evil of the Confederacy, the wickedness of rebellion, and the sanctity of civil government. He took a nuanced view and argued that an immoral government was subject to the right of revolution, but only after every constitutional method had been exhausted. He contended that the Federal government was a just government, that the South had no legitimate grievances, and that secession was an unacceptable means of opposition. He began by quoting Proverbs 17:11, which states that “A wicked man seeketh only rebellion,” and then explained,

We have in these words this plain announcement—that Rebellion is a crime, and shall be visited with terrible judgment... God declares his thought, and utters his sanction of law. This is also the expression of natural conscience - vindicating in our breast the Divine procedure, when the majesty of insulted government is asserted, and penalty applied.18

While the United States government did not openly endorse religion in its documents, the theology of the sacred government was the overwhelming theme of Northern sermons related to the war. However, there was also an undercurrent of abolitionism that showed itself throughout the war, and became a key part of Unionist rhetoric.

Abolition as a Holy Cause

From the very beginning of the war, the North made it clear that, while slavery may have been the wedge that split the Union, the Union itself was the object of the Civil War. Lincoln did not hesitate to state that his objective was to preserve the Union, not to end slavery. Moreover, actual abolitionists were rare even in the North. Despite this, the abolitionist minority made itself heard and did an exceptional job of grafting abolition into Union rhetoric, especially after Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation in 1862 lent much more credence to their cause.

The abolitionists viewed the pro-slavery governments of the South as an enemy, and this hostility meshed well with the aggressive propaganda already employed by the Union. President Lincoln, in his second inaugural address, declared that slavery was a crime against God, explaining,

If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offences which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him?19

While he refrains from stating it directly, Lincoln makes clear the idea that slavery is an offense against God for which He is punishing the United States. Thus, in a brilliant bit of oration, Lincoln avoids the overconfident declarations of God’s favor in many sermons and speeches, both North and South, whilst invoking the looming threat of God’s judgment on the war.

Many Northerners were significantly less tactful than Lincoln in their condemnations of slavery. Reverend Daniel Steele delivered another sermon comparing the Confederacy

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to the rebellious tribe of Benjamin, and said of slavery:

In the one, undestroyed idolatry bred disobedience to the law of Moses, and treason to the Commonwealth; and in the other, African slavery, abhorred of God, engendered a hideous barbarism in the noon of the nineteenth century, and organized a foul revolt against the wisest government ever framed for the good of mankind. In both was there an irresistible uprising of the loyal hosts against the insurgents, an uprising inspired and commanded by God Himself. For the voice of the King of Kings was no more clearly heard marshalling the faithful tribes of Israel against Gibeah, the champion of murder, than it is heard resounding through all our loyal States, commanding our sons and brothers to set themselves in battle array against Richmond, the strong-hold of slave-breeding. 20

Thus, through song and sermon, pro-Union religious rhetoric created a clear-cut battle of good versus evil. The Union was a sacred thing, its government instituted by God, and the Confederacy, in rebelling against the divine institution of government, was cast in the role at best of the tribe of Benjamin, and at worst of Satan. Slavery only served as more proof of Southern wickedness, whether the objection was to the “Slave Power” or to slavery itself. Defining themselves and their cause in these religious terms, Northern troops marched southward to crush the great evil that threatened the whole of the nation.

The Confederates as Defenders of Conservative Christianity

In a contrast to the Union and its aggressive rhetoric portraying the Confederates as an evil to be struck down, the Confederacy painted itself as a defender and cast the Federals as an invading army of heretics, infidels, and mercenaries, with Southerners as a bulwark between Christian Dixie and the Northern invaders. Reverend Robert Sledd, in a sermon to Confederate cadets in 1861, warned them not to surrender themselves to the passions of war, though they “behold her [the South’s] pleasant places made desolate by an infidel and fanatical foe.” 21 Equally harsh was Reverend George Pierce’s depiction of the allegedly faithless politics of the North:

A perverted public sentiment, largely tinctured with atheism, which excludes God from the affairs of earth, and confines Him, (if it admit His existence at all,) to heaven and heavenly things, is a fruitful source of venality and corruption in high places and low places, of insubordination, of commercial fraud and infidelity to contracts, of impious legislation and wide-spread contamination. Our republican fathers wisely separated the Church from the State; their degenerate successors madly separated the State from Heaven. It has been the fashion to theorise and decide on politics, as if Christianity were not a superior, supreme law, and as though God had abandoned his book and his rights to the chances of a doubtful contest. Statesmanship has become an earthly science, a philosophy without religion, and a system of expediency without a conscience. 22

Similarly, Reverend Joel Tucker roundly condemned the North, describing the conflict as a religious one and telling his Fayetteville, North Carolina, congregation that “Your cause is the cause of God, of Christ, of humanity. It is a conflict of truth with error--of the Bible with Northern infidelity --of a pure Christianity with Northern fanaticism--of liberty with despotism--of right with might.” 23

Far from viewing themselves as “rebels,” the Confederates viewed themselves as upholding a long tradition of Christian government and were conservative in their policies. Davis argued in his inaugural address that the Confederate Constitution was no revolutionary document, but an improvement upon the United States Constitution. 24 In a similar vein, they argued

that it was in fact the Northerners who were going against the divine order. Along with portraying themselves as defenders of Christianity, the Confederates also contrasted the North’s alleged faithlessness with the South’s piety.

Piety as a Virtue of the Confederate Military

Another major Confederate narrative concerned the piety of their military. From generals to private soldiers, the Confederate armies were considered highly religious. That perception was a boon to Confederate propaganda, meshing nicely with the accusations of Northern heresy and godlessness. Particularly notable officers in this regard were General Robert E. Lee and Major General Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson, men who were highly regarded in the Confederacy.

General Lee spent most of the war commanding the Army of Northern Virginia. In that capacity, he exhibited a strong faith that deeply impressed many. Confederate chaplain William Bennett had nothing but praise for the Virginian, writing, “General Lee attached his men to him not less by his goodness of heart and his deep-toned, unobtrusive piety, than by his skill and courage as a warrior – he was to them the model of a Christian soldier.”

Similarly, in his book, Robert E. Lee: The Christian, William J. Johnson shows that Lee was overwhelmingly regarded by his contemporaries as a model Christian soldier. He noted, among other instances, that after Lee’s death an assembly of soldiers and officers who had served with him adopted a resolution that included the statement, “We have been daily witness to his quiet, unostentatious Christian life; we have seen him prove that ‘no adversity could ever move, nor policy at any time entice to shrink from God and from His Word.’” Lee’s faith was, to the Confederates, clear proof of the holiness of their cause, and Lee’s status as the ideal Christian soldier was rivaled only by one of his corps commanders, Major General “Stonewall” Jackson.

Jackson earned a reputation as an incredibly devout Christian, praying frequently and openly. Were he merely an unusually devout man, it is doubtful he would have had the impact he did, but his remarkable success in battle combined with his piety to establish him as the ultimate religious role model in the Southern armies. The Confederacy could not have created a better source of propaganda if it had tried. Jackson achieved a status shared by few other men, and became a revered legend in his own lifetime while earning the almost fanatical admiration of his troops. This is reflected in the popular Confederate song “Stonewall Jackson’s Way.” The ditty expresses a profound respect for his faith with,

Silence! ground arms! kneel all! caps off!
Old “Blue Light’s” going to pray.
Strangle the fool that dares to scoff!
Attention! it’s his way.
Appealing from his native sod,
In forma pauperis to God,
Say “Bare Thine arm; stretch forth thy rod,
Amen!” “That’s Stonewall Jackson’s way.”

The near-religious reverence for Jackson was not reserved to his troops. On the home front, Confederate citizens idolized the general, as much for his devout faith as his military abilities. When Jackson died, the outpouring of grief was incredible, and ministers delivered entire sermons pondering the meaning of his death. Jackson was used to illustrate that God might do something seemingly hostile to a Christian cause for His own ends, a concept that provided Southerners with consolation as the defeat of the Confederacy loomed.

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25William W. Bennett, A Narrative of the Great Revival Which Prevailed in the Southern Armies During the Late Civil War Between the States of the Federal Union (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1989), 67
That religion has a profound effect on the morale of soldiers is borne out repeatedly by eyewitnesses, but the uniqueness of the Confederate revival is found in its extent. James Graham of the 27th North Carolina wrote to his mother that “The revival in our Brigade is still going on and there are a good many converts every day and almost everybody is becoming serious. Instead of hearing swearing all the time you seldom hear an oath in our Reg’t now,” and that “All the churches are filled to overflowing every night.”

The Confederate revival made for superb propaganda in portraying their cause as a holy one. Noted Civil War historian James McPherson writes,

The Confederate revivals had gone a long way toward raising morale in the Southern armies from its low point at the end of 1863. Heightened religiosity helped to prevent the collapse of both armies during the carnage of 1864, but was a particularly potent force in the Confederacy. It may not be an exaggeration to say that the revivals of 1863-64 enabled Confederate armies to prolong the war into 1865.

The Confederate narrative of the war, then, focused on the piety of the Southerners in contrast to Northern faithlessness. Southern religious propaganda was a call for Christian Southerners to rally and hold the line against a heretical invader. That they would be able to hold these invaders off even in the face of superior resources was, of course, not a question.

Reactions to the End of the War

When the Confederacy finally fell to the United States, North and South handled the conclusion of the War quite differently. In the North, it was vindication of their cause, condemnation of the rebellion, and in many

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31Bennett, A Narrative of the Great Revival Which Prevailed in the Southern Armies During the Late Civil War Between the States of the Federal Union, 363.
cases considered proof of the wickedness of slavery. Reverend Norman Seaver spoke on the subject, celebrating the War’s end as proof of God’s favor towards the U.S. government, declaring that “In overthrowing Richmond, the hand of God hath pointed out republicanism as the one true and universal form of government for all the nations of the earth.”

Others took a more reflective view and found the War to be a humbling experience. Reverend James Vose took this view, but nonetheless also saw it as a triumph and vindication of the values of the North, preaching that “The spirit of New England shall infuse every part and portion of the South, and men shall wonder and be astonished that rebel leaders ever laid their sacrilegious hands upon the ark of our holy covenant.”

Southerners viewed the result of the war in an entirely different light. Defeat was baffling, because in the opinion of the Southerners, it was the loss of an unquestionably morally superior cause and army to an obviously less moral one; yet at the same time, it was necessarily also the will of God. Many interpretations arose regarding the defeat. According to some, it was a punishment for idolizing leaders such as General Lee, or even making an idol of Confederate independence itself. Others freely admitted that they simply could not comprehend it, but that it was part of God’s oft-inscrutable plan and must be accepted.

Conclusion – America’s Great Schism

The religious differences between the North and South are too ingrained and long-standing to place the blame wholly, or even mostly, on the propaganda of the Civil War. Nonetheless, propaganda played a crucial role in justifying and sanctifying the respective causes of the combatants in the Civil War and, like much of history, offers us a glimpse of an earlier form of differences and disputes that are still relevant today. The Civil War was not a religious war by any stretch of the imagination, but many of the numerous religious soldiers did see the conflict through the lens of their faith. To understand the rhetoric of war is to gain a better understanding of what spoke to the common soldier, and it is this author’s hope that this paper has shed some small light on the way the Christian soldiers of the Civil War defined themselves and their enemies.


*Paul Harvey, “‘Yankee faith’ and Southern redemption : white Southern Baptist ministers, 1850-1890.” In Religion and the American Civil War, 173-175.

*Rable, God’s Almost Chosen Peoples, 393*
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