



Constructing Religious Meaning for Children Out of the American Civil War

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Editor's Note

This article has been updated October 15, 2002, following a comment made by a reader. The revision occurs in paragraph 9 and is explained in the attached footnote (**).

Introduction

[1] In the fall of 1869, the American Baptist Publication Society sponsored a three-day convention for the Baptist Sunday-School Institute. Meeting in St. Louis, the assembly convened Protestant clerics nationwide, local dignitaries, and a large number of Sunday-school teachers and laypersons. Spirits ran high among organizers as representatives from both North and South gathered for the first time under the Institute's banner. Although the principle objective of the convention was to discuss the means by which to "elevate the character of our work" towards children, the mere specter of southern and northern Protestants working in communion with one another towards a shared goal seemed to carry the day (see Ryland: 17-24). Even the mayor of St. Louis, Nathan Cole, could not mask his enthusiasm addressing the opening-day crowd as "veterans of a branch of that noble army which is to perform a more glorious part in history than the cohorts of Rome, the imperial armies of Europe, or the Grand Army of the Republic" (Ryland: 6). The record is silent on how southerners, still suffering from the physical and mental scourges of their defeat, received the mayor's remarks.

[2] What the record does reveal is that such stated exuberance and boasts of unity among Protestants masked a lingering animosity northern and southern Christians felt towards one another.<1> The mission of "saving" children, my research suggests, appeared to provide a rare opportunity where lingering hostilities from the Civil War might be set aside and church leaders could resume their collective work in creating a Redeemer Nation. Reverend Charles H. Ryland recognized the tenuous nature of this collaborative effort as he remarked to those gathered in St. Louis that "it is a sad fact that voices of love have need to be raised among us - it is a happy fact that the Sunday-school affords a platform upon which we can meet as brethren." But hope sprang eternal with this new effort, as many believed the hatreds of the past would simply subside. As Ryland put it, the lasting effects of their inaugural work would "send forth the dove over the subsiding waves of strife . . . [so] that she may return to the Ark of God bearing in her beak the olive branch of peace" (18-19).

[3] Some felt this missionary field was an opportunity for Protestant America to reestablish its claims of moral authority by disassociating itself from its contentious past and the bloodshed of war. Many Americans still held the view that the churches were principally responsible for the nation's tragic bloodletting. During the secession crisis, the editor of the *New York Freeman's Journal* chided Protestants for:

This unholy and fratricidal war began with your hard-shell Reformed Presbyterians, and your soft-shell new-school Presbyterians, and with your Baptists, Methodists, and such like. You, Protestant religionists were the very first to begin this game of disunion (December 1, 1860).

Nor was criticism of Protestants the sole dominion of American Catholics. Throughout the war the

popular press joined the chorus questioning the actions of religious leaders. Criticism of such leadership even came from within Protestant circles. "Christians have a fearful responsibility for the present exasperation," wrote John B. Minor, a layman and professor of law at the University of Virginia, to Robert L. Dabney, one of the South's leading theologians and defenders. "They are . . . far from exercising any wholesome restraint," Minor's admonishment continued, "upon the passions of their neighbors and associates" (quoted in Johnson: 219). Hundreds of letters and diaries from the Civil War era are steeped with theological questioning and a spiritual uneasiness about the nation going to war. For many, the idea that Christians could openly espouse war and killing seemed paradoxical. In her now-famous diary, Mary Chesnut writing from her plantation in South Carolina at the close of the 1861 campaign stated her beliefs quite succinctly: "I am puzzled - straight out. I do not believe a genuine follower of Christ can be a soldier. It is which calls for all that he forbids. There! The Christ's religion eliminates war and slavery" (Woodward: 261). Opinions like these forecast the tremendous burden religious communities faced attempting not only to reconcile with their fellow brethren across the Mason-Dixon line, but also with the larger society after the war.

[4] How religious practitioners sought to negotiate this process of reconciliation while operating in the proclaimed "neutral" field of religious education and Sunday-school work is the focus of the remaining presentation. This paper focuses on three particular areas of my research. The first is a simple but often-overlooked point; namely, the Civil War had a profound and often dramatic impact on the lives of children. Second, contrary to what some scholars have suggested to date, the religious lessons conveyed to children were not steeped in theological language about good versus evil. Nor were children's experiences of war articulated in such contrasting terms. For whom God "favored" in war, and for what historical ends did the war serve, were two issues of great uncertainty for Civil War children.<2> Finally, the substance of lessons taught to children about the war shifted, often time dramatically, in the years after the war. Since the majority of these vignettes leaned heavily upon the social conventions of the day, they were fraught with the contradictions of the times. As a result of these shifting alliances, the meaning of the death and the destruction wrought by the fighting was a particularly acute problem for children to reconcile. Before turning to these issues, however, permit me to place this argument in some historiographic context.

Methodological and Historiographical Issues

[5] In his seminal study, *The Irrepressible Conflict, 1850-1865*, Arthur Cole launched his now renowned "two civilizations" thesis. It claimed the cleavage among northerners and southerners in the political arena was but one symptom of a growing "cultural" split that as Cole wrote, "reached beyond political acerbities into the very substance of life itself" (242). For scholars of religion, Cole's thesis raises interesting issues about the war. If Cole's assertion is true, we may ask how did religion help to shape these regional identities? In particular, did these identities become so distinct from one another that religion served as nothing more than an instrument of sectionalism? Since the publication of Cole's monumental study, several historians have refined his argument attempting to excavate with greater care those areas in which "the very substance of life" changed.

[6] While considerable work remains in the field of religion, scholars such as C. C. Goen have convincingly argued the importance of religion as a causative force in the nation's division. Goen asserted the denominational schisms of the antebellum period were not only a precursor to later sectional divisiveness, but in fact served as a template for what Americans came to understand as a formula for the peaceful disillusionment of institutional and social bonds. Other scholars have forwarded similarly compelling arguments about the centrality of religion in session. In her study of southern nationalism, Drew Gilpin Faust unflinchingly asserted, "religion provided a transcendent framework for southern nationalism." Northerners also placed an equal emphasis on the transcendent in their conception of "the Union." As James H. Moorhead's study of apocalyptic imagery posited, northerners marched into battle "weaving . . . secular and religious motifs into one holy history." Although these studies have contributed significantly to our appreciation of Civil War religion, their emphasis on superstructural issues (i.e. theology and ideological) as motivating factors for war reveals only silhouette images of what is the rich and contoured terrain of American religious life.

[7] In recent years, historians have adopted new methods to plumb the depths of Victorian religious life. These scholars have asserted that in order to understand how religiosity was shaped, the student of the period must look beyond the church and its confessions. Instead they must take seriously the ways the domestic sphere - specifically in terms of material culture - was imbued with a type of spiritual significance. Therefore, three important spheres of influence - church, society, and home - helped to shape what Colleen McDannell has aptly termed "domestic religiosity." Given that Victorian piety was so closely allied with certain social conventions, I became particularly interested in trying to understand what religious communities literally and figuratively "produced" to teach children about the war. Once I began

to research the lives of adolescents who lived through the war and the religious reflections about the war, I began to discern more fully the intricate topographical features of what is the diverse religious landscape of the Civil War era.

A Truly "Civil" War

[8] Writing from her parents' estate in Madison County, Virginia, on July 24, 1861, Sara Ann Fife reflected on the previous days events:

We had a splendid victory at "Bull Run" on 18th of this month; the Yankee Grand Army under McDowell was driven back in its advance toward Richmond; their loss, 450 killed & wounded; ours 85. . . . On 21st, the battle of "Manassas" was fought; said to be the most severe ever fought on the American continent. Begun at 4 o'clock in the morning and lasted until 9 at night . . . the cannonading was heard here, a distance of about seventy miles.

While the young girls recounting of events were somewhat inaccurate - Federal forces engaged Confederates at Blackburn's Ford, Virginia on the eighteenth where Union losses were only 57, not 450 killed and wounded - her recording of this affair is notable for several reasons.

[9] First, despite being nearly 70 miles from the battle, Sara Fife could hear the distant firing of cannons. This audible experience of the battle was not uncommon for many adolescents who noted such occasions in their writing. Such experiences, coupled with letters received from family members serving in the army, gave children a sense of the extraordinary nature of the times. For some the war infringed upon their lives in ways far more dramatic than these audible "flashes" of battle. Five-year-old Frank Caldwell of Warrenton, Virginia, whose mother's letters often bespoke of the threat of invasion by "vile Yankees," wrote to his father working in Richmond, "Dear Pa, I love you so much. The Yankees have not come yet. I am not afraid of them" (Welton: 89). Throughout the war, however, Frank's mother went to great lengths to keep her family shielded from the invading Federals. Other parents were not so cautious. At the age of thirteen, Francis Vinton Greene, the son of sixty-two-year-old Brigadier General George Sears Greene, spent more than a month with his father commanding the 3rd Brigade of the Army of the Potomac. Young Greene's tour of duty included countless marches of twenty miles or more, carrying a weapon, and first-hand experience pursuing the Confederate Army following the fighting at Gettysburg. During his time with the Federal Army, the young boy encountered not only the wounded from battle, but also family members who had lost loved ones during the war.<*> Nor was Greene's participation with the army unique. It was not uncommon to find children "volunteering" for service on the home front. While recovering from an amputation after receiving a severe wound at the Battle of Chancellorsville, James McWhinnie, a soldier with the 20th Connecticut Volunteers, wrote his mother a letter concerning his condition. In describing the details of his recovery, the twenty-two year-old McWhinnie abruptly paused in his narrative, reflecting upon the care he received from a young boy in the hospital: "James Perkins is in a Philadelphia Hospital I often think of them all [and] that little German boy too that brought me my meal, poor boy . . . I suppose [sic] father will tell you all he know[s] about the boy." As these former accounts illustrate, whether at home, at play, or contributing to the cause, the war invaded the everyday lives of many of the nation's youth.

[10] A second observation to be made of Fife's account is her awareness of casualty rates. This type of reporting or awareness of the killed and wounded was not particular to Fife's diary, but was continually expressed by children. This fascination, I think, illustrates two important themes about the carnage wrought by war. One, it demonstrates how the wild speculations about casualty rates appearing in the popular press greatly shaped the perspectives of even the youngest members at home. Two, these references suggest how acutely attuned children were to the anomalous character of these deaths and the tumultuousness of the times. On June 15, 1862, Sara recorded her feelings about recent events this way:

Battles have been lost and won, but the hurly-burly is not yet done. Brave Gen. Ashby was killed in a skirmish on the 5th. A mist of romance seemed to envelope him, like Henry I of England he is said never to have smiled since the death of his brother. I am wearing a mourning badge for him.

Children as young as three years old were versed in the colloquialisms of the day that sought to locate the reasons for so many deaths. Susan Caldwell reported to her husband Lycurgus, that their daughter Jessie "the other evening . . . was standing at my back window and the soldiers were firing into the grave of some one who they had just buried. On hearing the gun she sprung to her feet and said Lincoln had killed my poor soldier - bad old Lincoln" (Welton: 60). Northern children, on the other hand, wanted to "hang Jefferson Davis high in a sour apple tree" for the death of Union men.

[11] The specter of death cast a shadow over other aspects of everyday life. The physical space around many southern children was dramatically altered by the war. In the weeks and months after the battle, it was not uncommon to find curious children playing near the grave markings of those killed in battle. Following the war, this awareness of the local terrain and where bodies might be interred proved to be of benefit to the Federal government. Local adolescents served as unofficial "scouts" to the Quartermaster General's office to help locate lost gravesites or remains that had emerged from haphazardly dug graves (see National Archives). With the establishment of national graveyards and Memorial Day services, children's relationship to the Civil War dead changed. The roles young boys and girls played in these ceremonies quickly became rituals that sought to infuse children with a sense of solemnity, patriotism, and civic virtue. Given their experiences of the war, however, the lessons learned were not always clear. To examine this issue in greater detail let us in the remainder of this paper turn to the religious literature produced for children in light of their experiences.

An Uneasy Relationship: "Domestic Religion" and the Scourges of War

[12] Few scholars have researched the subject of what religious lessons were taught to children in light of the Civil War. Furthermore, these studies are inadequate because they suggest the religious lessons taught were rooted in issues of theodicy.<3> My research has led me to quite a different assessment. Despite emphatic assertions by northerners and southerners prior to the conflict that "God ordained this war," such declarations soon disappeared from the religious language used by both the vanquished and the victor. Victory was no longer the litmus test to determine which section of the nation was the truly "chosen people." Instead, children were schooled in popular paradigms and archetypes that relied heavily upon existing social conventions. That is to say, a dramatic shift occurred in the religious motifs used to teach about war. This shift coupled with the tensions between war and "domestic religiosity" conveyed a confusing message to children about the war, their fellow Christians across the Mason-Dixon line, and God's precise relationship to it all.

[13] One historian studying the formation of Confederate identity has insightfully suggested that "for those concerned with forging a nationalist identity and traditions, children posed a pressing concern." Like all the great civilizations that preceded it, Confederate leaders assumed children and teenagers were to be "tutored" in the "rights and duties of Confederate citizenship" (Rubin: 90-92). One study suggests that at least 150 children's books were produced during the life of the Confederacy with an estimated one-fifth of these works being catechisms and hymnals (Kennerly: 2-15).<4> Four of the six children's periodicals produced in the South during this period were explicitly religious as well (Kennerly: 1-2).<5> While considerable work remains to be done on northern publications for children, in terms of sheer volume the North far exceeded the rates of publication found in the South at this time.<6>

[14] These statistics convey the importance placed upon both children and religion in the South's efforts to forge a new nation or in the North's attempt to recast the nation anew. But the Christian message did not always neatly dovetail into the nationalism of the day. Nor, if God had truly ordained this war, were the methods chosen by God always deemed good. For example, one primer entitled *The Dixie Speller*, counseled children against electing "bad men" into office when they were older because "if the rulers in the United States had been good Christian men, the present war would not have come upon us." In characterizing the war, it suggested, "This sad war is a bad thing . . . my pa-pa went, and died in the army. My big brother went too, and got shot. A bomb-shell took of his head." Efforts to navigate the tragedies of war were furthered compounded for children in the South who used edited editions of religious literature from the North. While northern and southern children recited the same prayers, songs, and moral prescriptions, when it came to lessons concerning national identity the youth were taught their northern brethren were: "An *enemy* is one who hates us. The Yankees are enemies to the Southern people. We are commanded to love our enemies" (Moore: 65).<7> Confusing messages about God's purported purpose in war, Christian fellowship, and killing were not just received on the page. Children also experienced these contradictions firsthand.

[15] While vacationing with her parents in the White Mountains of New Hampshire in July of 1863, twelve-year-old Sarah Putnam of Andover, Massachusetts, recorded her experiences in her diary. Although far removed from the frontlines, the war remained ever-present. Traveling by carriage from North Conway to the town of Bartlett on the morning of the twenty-second, the Putnams decided to take a break from their travels. Sarah recounted what followed, this way:

The road from North Conway to Bartlett is *very* beautiful. A little time before we arrived at Bartlett, we stopped at a farm-house to lunch. The poor mistress is almost killed by the loss of her son who was fighting at the war. She has another one there now, and he had written to his uncle only a few days ago telling him of his brothers death, and it was a splendid one. The poor woman handed the letter to Mother to read, but she couldn't do it. He said in the end, "Tell Mother that she must

remember that we all must die, and God is at the South as well as at the North." Then he ended his letter with something like this "Good bye, in hopes of seeing you all on earth again!!" (Putnam 1863: #AC64-M26).

Like several other unique events Sarah experienced in her lifetime, she recorded this episode by drawing a picture. Yet unlike other depictions she experienced first-hand, Sarah used her imagination to capture the events of the battlefield. Experiences such as these coupled with the messages conveyed in works like *The Dixie Speller* certainly raised questions about the role of religion in such a devastating war. In the years immediately following the war, the answers to these questions were no clearer as returning soldiers sought to reconnect with the communities they had left behind. This reintegration into the home front was a complex process. As one scholar of Civil War veteran organizations suggests, returning veterans "walked the fine line which separated political principle from mere expediency, economic necessity from greed, and ideological commitment from blind prejudice" (McDonough: 2). The foibles of reconciling domestic religiosity with tribulations of war were evident in literature produced by religious groups intending to nourish the morals of youth.

[16] Two of the leading publishers of this type of literature were the American Tract Society and American Sunday-School Union. Storybooks produced by these presses following Appomattox were chocked-full of morality plays that conveyed America's weariness of war. For example, *Frank's Victory*, published in 1865, is a story about a "willful child" struggling to become a morally upright and faithful young man. What is revealing about the plot is the way in which the narrative filters Christian morality through the sieve of domesticity (see Figure 1). Frank's "willfulness," which the story suggests he needs to "gain victory over," is associated with his forays into various physical activities and adventures away from the home (i.e. the domain of Victorian manhood). In one episode, Frank's pleas for permission to go to the local green to play soldier with his friends leaves his piously portrayed mother frustrated and asking, "why can not you amuse yourself with your books and pictures?" Frank's dismissive demeanor, an attitude that conjures up the violation of the fifth commandment of honoring parents, is also subtly but repeatedly associated with masculine ambition and physical pursuits such as soldiering.



Figure 1

[17] Yet even among Frank's male cohorts ambiguities about the concept of a soldier are revealed. Frank, who suffers from a twisted ankle, joins his friends on the green but is rebuked by them when he attempts to join them in their game of war. "Who ever heard of a soldier," one of the boys rhetorically asked, "limping along upon crutches?" Other works illustrated this uneasiness towards returning soldiers. One book simply admonished children who "taunt the poor soldier" upon his return "because he is in rags" (Moore: 45).

[18] One of the more interesting works exploring such themes was entitled *Who Shall Be Captain?* Published in Philadelphia in 1866, this collection of stories schooled its audience in general lessons on moral formation. One story in particular, however, was germane to the day's events. In "The Poor Soldier," two young siblings, Philip and Alice Dean, are depicted traveling on an unused stretch of road when they spot an invalid man off in the distance. A sense of foreboding colors the opening scene as the children walk along a stretch of road reportedly haunted by ghosts. Here the two parties meet and the children come to discover that the invalid man is a former Union soldier who is physically exhausted and in need of a drink. Upon fetching him some water the soldier praises the children stating "God bless you, my dears! I didn't know but I should die here alone." After learning more of the man's current plight - a situation where the forces of nature and his physical disability have left him homeless for the night - the children invite the soldier home with them (see Figure 2).



Figure 2

[19] When the group arrives home, their mother, the recently widowed Mrs. Dean and her sister-in-law, Mrs. Stone, greet the children. After retrieving a basin with fresh water for the invalid soldier to wash the dust off himself, Mrs. Dean invites the soldier to stay the evening for dinner and a good night's rest. This invitation is perceived as a transgression against the sphere of domestic bliss, bidding Mrs. Stone to ask: "I want to know, sister Dean, what you mean by taking in every ragamuffin that comes along the road!" She continued, "Do you mean to ask that fellow to stay here all night, on purpose to rob and murder us all?" (43). The story line continues to portray Mrs. Dean as a charitable saint who attends to the soldier's

physical well being while asking nothing in return. The actions of the mother seem to transcend existing social constructs, a demonstration of true piety toward society's outcast. In the closing scene, the soldier now dying from his battle wounds, unexpectedly gives the widowed mother a large sum of cash that the reader is told will save the financially strapped family farm. The soldier dies in the mother's arms and almost immediately, to reinforce the dichotomy between true and false piety, the sister-in-law is depicted entering the dead man's room. Seeing the dead soldier the sister immediately "grumbles" about the "expense and trouble of a funeral" and the "trial to her nerves as having a dead person in the house." The moral lesson of the mother's response is unmistakably clear:

He left me money enough to pay for his funeral expenses . . . and as for the rest, Martha, you should remember that everyone must have a dead body in the house some day or other. It will be well for you if you are prepared to leave your mortal body to the earth as this poor soldier was (58).

Suffering in Silence: Theological Conundrums and the Aftermath of War

[20] The assertion by those attending the St. Louis convention that Sunday-school publications would become "the first artery through which the love of the denomination shall flow freely, North and South," was a claim reflecting both the optimism and naiveté of the times. An optimism that believed the fragile relationships between estranged communities of faith would prosper and flourish in the fertile ground of Sunday-school missions. At the same time, the opinions voiced by this gathering reflect a dearth in understanding on just how greatly the Civil War had scarred the very soul of the nation.

[21] Victorian social conventions, as they were, buried these wounds deeply allowing them to surface on rare occasion. Sara Putnam's diary perhaps best illustrates this type of reserved emotionalism among children. On April 15, 1865, she recorded the following entry in her diary from her home in Andover, Massachusetts:

Now guess my feelings, when coming down to breakfast at mother's saying "The president is killed!" I stood so for a few minutes without speaking. I cannot realize it yet. Poor, dear, old, Abe. Now I will tell how his death came on without any sentiment, for that does no good" (1865: #AC64-M26).

As churches would come to understand, the new mission of proselytizing to children alone could not repair the severely frayed bonds of fellowship, nor could it easily talk about the war.

[22] But perhaps most startling is the lack of appreciation on the part of Protestants to understand what one scholar has coined "the historicist pattern of Victorian thought" (Turner: 173). Northern clerics prognosticated that a Federal victory would assure radical economic and social changes in the South, while bringing the nation as a whole closer to fulfilling its prophetic role as a "city upon a hill." With each passing day, however, the present seemed to call into question the true meaning of past victories. The emergence of Jim Crow, scientific thinking, and agnosticism, during the post-war years not only raised questions about the very principles upon which northern victory ultimately rested, but also prompted issues about the immutable law of God's governance of human history. Thus, when it came to the issue of the Civil War, Protestants could no more escape their past than they could explain it.

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