The Peace-Loving Preachers of War: Understanding the American

Clergy’s Shift to Interventionism in the First World War

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**Reflective Essay:**

The process of researching and writing my essay “The Peace-Loving Preachers of War: Understanding the American Clergy’s Shift to Interventionism in the First World War” provided me with a valuable opportunity to not just learn about a specific topic in history but to develop a unique contribution to that topic. My project began with the broad desire to learn more about the way in which the Christian religion interacted with and influenced the First World War. Over the course of a semester, that spark of interest led me to discover the fascinating subject of the American clergy’s evolving support for their nation’s intervention and to develop my own original arguments on the nature of this ideological development.

As typical for any project, the research for this paper involved a long process of elimination and rejection. Due to the broad focus with which I started, I spent dozens of hours reading through letters, poems, and memoirs from soldiers in the hope that I could discover patterns and trends pertaining to the spiritual convictions of those serving on the front lines during the Great War. Likewise, I scoured collections of wartime posters and propaganda in search of religious themes and iconography. Although both searches yielded interesting discoveries, I ultimately concluded that the lack of secondary sources available for these topics made them too impenetrable for a single semester-long study. For two weeks, I also experimented with a cross-cultural comparison of Christianity as a motivating factor in the United States and England during the war. Through discussions with Dr. Barnwell, who oversaw my research, I eventually concluded that broadening my focus beyond America would create too many challenges for this length of project.

It was not until I discovered Ray Abrams’ *Preachers Present Arms: The Role of the American churches and clergy in World Wars I and II* at Brookens Library that I began honing in on the American clergy as the central focus for my research. Published in 1933, Abrams’ work criticizes the clergy for their malleability and contains shocking excerpts from American pastors calling for the extinction of the German race. I searched the library’s databases and book catalogs for more recent works on this topic, but I was amazed that no scholar since Abrams’ has attempted to provide a thorough and direct analysis of the American clergy’s attitude toward the First World War. I therefore determined to analyze Abrams’ thesis through the lens of the most recent scholarly perspectives on the war and see if his cynical approach to the clergy still holds up.

To accomplish this task, I realized that I needed to become well-versed in all the scholarly insights and debates surrounding this narrow topic. Over the course of the following months, I used the I-Share service through Brookens Library to request more than a dozen books related to Christianity and the war. I also made use of the online databases offered by the library, such as JSTOR and Academic Search Complete, to find scholarly articles. I eventually discovered several other works that touch briefly or tangentially on the attitudes of American pastors toward the war. Although these works clearly indicate that Abrams’ approach to the topic is no longer accepted within the academic community, they also reveal that no scholar has yet offered a comprehensive counterapproach. I decided to try to fill this vacuum with a fresh analysis of the American clergy’s attitude to their country’s involvement in the war.

In order to create a truly fresh perspective on the clergy, I knew I could not rely on the collection of quotes and documents gathered by Abrams. Therefore, I endeavored to return to the primary sources themselves in search of dominant trends and ideas among the clergy. To begin this part of my research, I gathered the books and collections of lectures by the wartime clergy available at Brookens. However, I quickly realized that a survey of ministerial opinion would require a greater selection of documents than I could realistically obtain in printed form over the remaining course of the semester. Fortunately, I discovered that dozens of published sermons from popular preachers during the early twentieth century have been digitized by universities across America and made available for free online. I combed every available online archive for pertinent material, but was particularly impressed in the selection held by the HathiTrust Digital Library and the Internet Archive websites.

Once I had gathered a wide selection of documents from the clergy, I used secondary literature available online and at the library to categorize each minister according to his level of influence in the United States during the war and by the representativeness of his beliefs within the mainstream Christian community. This process helped me prioritize the materials that offered the best expression of popular clerical beliefs. It also helped me discover the significance of the Social Gospel movement in early twentieth century America, which prompted me to develop an argument concerning the ideological environment of the clergy during this time.

Although I generally had great success with my primary source research, one area in which I struggled was with the inclusion of Catholic sources. I was unable to find a wide selection of lectures, books, or sermons from leaders in the Roman Catholic Church at the time. This lack of sources compelled me to rely on secondary material to gain an understanding of Catholic attitudes in America during the war and it forced me to center my final paper around an analysis of Protestant clergy.

I used the primary and secondary sources I had gathered to develop a hypothesis that, contrary to Abrams’ argument, the American clergy displayed a remarkable degree of ideological consistency throughout the war and that most pastors held firm to their overarching desire for peace. With the helpful advice and guidance of Dr. Barnwell, I spent the remainder of my time developing a clear way to articulate and support this theory.