

“Divine” Intervention

— American Religious Narratives of the Atomic Bombings, the End of the Pacific War, and the Allied Occupation —

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I. Introduction

Sailing across the Atlantic on the U.S.S. *Augusta*, President Harry S. Truman received a message from Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson at noon on August 6, 1945. The message read: “Results clear-cut successful in all respects. Visible effects greater than in any test.”⁽¹⁾ The cryptic language announced the birth of nuclear warfare in the skies above Hiroshima. On his way home from the Potsdam Conference, Truman anticipated Stimson’s cable. The language the President used to convey his apprehension both in his diary and to his wife, Bess, hinted at what would become the national discourse of a Christian and democratic nation as it reacted in paradoxical ways to the purposeful targeting of civilian women and children. During his second week at Potsdam, Truman, now cognizant of Alamogordo, wrote to Bess on July 22: “I’m going to mass at 11:30. . . I’ve already been to a Protestant service so I guess I should stand in good with the Almighty for the coming week-and my how I’ll need it.”⁽²⁾ By July 24, Truman and his staff, along with England’s Prime Minister Winston Churchill and his military advisers, decided that the atomic bomb would indeed be used over Japan within a few weeks.⁽³⁾

When Truman announced the atomic incineration of Hiroshima to a shocked — and in many instances, elated — American public, the hand of

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Providence loomed omnisciently behind the mushroom cloud, and it decidedly favored the American cause. As President Truman emphasized: “We may be grateful to Providence that the Germans got the V1’s and the V2’s [early rocket prototypes] late and in limited quantities and even more grateful that they did not get the atomic bomb at all.”⁽⁴⁾ Truman then credited the Lord’s guidance for the bomb’s success, saying, “We thank God that [the awful responsibility of the bomb] has come to us, instead of to our enemies; and we pray that He may guide us to use it in His ways and for His purposes.”⁽⁵⁾ God, therefore, stood on the American side and endowed the death of Japanese civilians with the legitimacy of His “will,” as voiced by Harry Truman.

Fortunately, Truman’s religious justification of the atomic bombings did not remain unchallenged, although the pervasive nature of American approval for the weapon rooted itself in discourse about the bombings that withstood fifty years of international criticism. On August 11, 1945 Truman wrote a letter to a Protestant church official who had questioned the President’s use of a weapon “indiscriminate” in its carnage. Truman replied, “When you have to deal with a beast you have to treat him as a beast. It is most regrettable but nevertheless true.”⁽⁶⁾ Truman’s response was the result of four years of brutal warfare in the Pacific that stripped both sides of humanity and rendered them barbaric. Embedded within the validation of the U.S.’s use of what Emperor Hirohito called a “new and most cruel weapon” was the portrait of a less-than-human enemy, crafted through propaganda and utilized to distance the very real human suffering at Hiroshima and Nagasaki from the American consciousness.

Historian John W. Dower contextualizes the confluence of religious language and dehumanizing propaganda: “[T]he heroic narrative [of the atomic bombings] is much richer than a humble thank-you to God for deliverance. The bombs were not merely necessary. They also were just, in the biblical sense of righteous retribution against a savage enemy.”⁽⁷⁾ This language permeated the end of the war in the Pacific, the discussion for and against the atomic bombs, and the Allied Occupation of Japan. Interpretations of the atomic bomb in the U.S. solidified the uniquely American assumption that divine intervention – in

the past and the present – warranted its position as leader of the free world. Such ideology formulated policies, particularly during General Douglas MacArthur’s occupation of Japan, that employed religion as a means for political gain and international status. Eventually, Truman’s religious sanctification of the bombings joined the national narrative of the end of the “Good War,” publicly endowing his decision with a virtually indelible morality. Ironically, such a seemingly unified portrayal of the “blessed” atomic bomb did not exist in the days, weeks, or years after August 1945. Nevertheless, the morality first asserted by Truman on August 6 continues to permeate the American memory of the bombings, silencing those uncomfortable with Truman’s rigid classification of divine intervention.

II. Religion and the “Enemy”: Sub-humans on both Sides of the Pacific

The roots of religious animosity stretched back for centuries between Japan and the West, surfacing once again with the onset of war. In the hypocrisy so often apparent during wartime, both Japan and the United States portrayed their struggle against the enemy as a holy war; for the victor, such rhetoric formed the backdrop for a burgeoning Cold War and for policies upheld by MacArthur, even when “unofficial,” during the Allied Occupation of Japan. The Allies categorized World War II as a “struggle to save Christian civilization,” and the Japanese cast their mission to defeat Western imperialism in the light of a “holy war for the establishment of eternal world peace.”⁽⁸⁾ The propaganda employed by Japan and the U.S., as well as denigrating descriptions of the physical and mental attributes of the enemy, contradicted the lofty ideals of the belligerents as it affirmed the purported inhumanity of the enemy. Symbols of the Allied Christian tradition appeared in Japanese propaganda cartoons to remind observers of the vast difference between Japan’s objectives of world peace and an Asia, unified under the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere, freed from Western colonial encroachment and the contradicting past and present behavior by Christian nations. In one cartoon, President Franklin Roosevelt wielded a crucifix as a

dagger, while another depicted Roosevelt himself crucified. Japanese propagandists transformed the cross, explains Dower, into a symbol of death and blood associated with the Allied powers. ⁽⁹⁾

The Japanese based their mandate to rule the Pacific under the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere on their divine descent, an assertion that granted their mission the moral upper hand that the U.S. also sought on its home front. Tracing the current Emperor Hirohito's heritage back to the 660 BC rule of Emperor Jimmu, who descended from the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, Japanese officials in the 1940s laid claim to a moral and racial superiority that they believed was uncontestable. Led by a divinely descended emperor, the Japanese waged a modern war cloaked in the rhetoric of a holy past. As political leader Nakajima Chikuhei contended in 1940, "There are superior and inferior races in the world, and it is the sacred duty of the leading race to lead and enlighten the inferior ones." ⁽¹⁰⁾ Obviously, the strong claims of morality and divine leadership on both sides of the Pacific led to an impasse in cultural, political, and military negotiations throughout the duration of the war. Japan's reliance on its divine heritage directly conflicted with America's notion, as voiced by Truman, that divine intervention ended the Pacific war when the Almighty handed the U.S. the atomic bomb.

Dower delineates the American belief that victory constituted the defeat of "barbarism" in the Pacific, for "this way of looking at the conflict dates back to the wartime propaganda, which highlighted the innate treachery and inhumanity of the Japanese far more than their undemocratic political system or colonial oppression. Portraying Japanese as vicious and even subhuman is subsidiary (but indispensable) to this scenario, which emphasized the virtues of American culture." ⁽¹¹⁾ If the Japanese were treacherous heathens, then Americans emerged as straightforward, genuine Christian defenders of the American dream; if the Japanese were subhuman, then the Americans creating anti-Japanese propaganda inched dangerously close to the rhetoric of extermination brandished by Hitler. The binary dividing citizens of the U.S. and Japan implied that good epithets used for Americans were matched to exactly the opposite

characteristic in the Japanese. Advertisements by U.S. weapons manufacturers merged anti-Japanese sentiment with their slogan “It’s blasting big red holes in little yellow men,” while a shipbuilder reminded customers, “[A] pagan and treacherous enemy spilled out of his homeland and overwhelmed the rich and peaceful islands of the South Seas.”⁽¹²⁾

All countries fighting in World War II utilized propaganda to catalyze national support for the war and to dehumanize the other side, thus solidifying support for the war and hatred of the enemy. While American propaganda painted an ugly picture of Nazi Germany and its soldiers, the U.S. built its propaganda against Japan on a vastly different premise that characterized the difference in battle attitudes. World War II journalist Ernie Pyle noted this inherent contradiction when he traveled to the Pacific theater after touring Europe. He recalled, “In Europe we felt our enemies, horrible and deadly as they were, were still people. But out here I gathered that the Japanese were looked upon as something subhuman and repulsive; the way some people feel about cockroaches or mice.”⁽¹³⁾

Pyle’s description of the Japanese as “vermin” embodied the attitude cultivated through American propaganda that permeated society at home and all levels of the U.S. military operating abroad. Later historians supported Pyle’s observations. David M. Kennedy writes:

The Pacific war was a war of distances, distances measured culturally as well as geographically. Each combatant, Japan and the United States alike, saw its adversary through a distorting lens laminated from historically accumulated layers of ignorance, arrogance, prejudice, and loathing. To a degree that had no equivalent in the western European theater, that for the ferocity it spawned compared only with the savage encounter between “Aryans” and Slavs on Hitler’s eastern front, the Japanese-American war was a race war, and just for that reason, in the historian John Dower’s phrase, a “war without mercy.”⁽¹⁴⁾

Four years of mutual hatred, denigration, and slaughter culminated on the

mornings of August 6 and 9, 1945, when the U.S. unleashed atomic power over the city centers of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The effects of dehumanizing propaganda were readily visible in average Americans' reactions to the instantaneous death of over 200,000 civilians. Many saw no reason to mourn — or even to express regret — for the mass killing of an enemy they viewed as worthy of extermination. In the aftermath of these bombings, religious rhetoric in the U.S. both sanctified and condemned Truman's decision. Ultimately, however, the justification for nuclear warfare overshadowed those who protested its birth.

III. Collective Sin: The “Good War’s” Cataclysmic End

On July 17, 1945 — three weeks before the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and one day after the world's first nuclear explosion at Alamogordo — one hundred and fifty-five scientists associated with the Manhattan Project sent a letter to Truman warning of the moral consequences such a strike against Japan held for the U.S. The scientists urged Truman to consider “all other moral responsibilities which are involved” and to realize that “[t]he added material strength which this lead [in the arms race] gives to the United States brings with it the obligation of restraint and if we were to violate this obligation our moral position would be weakened in the eyes of the world and in our own eyes.”⁽¹⁵⁾ Such a cautionary epistle, composed by the men and women who gave life to the nascent weapon, belies later claims by officials such as Congressman Sam Johnson that Hiroshima was “one of the most morally unambiguous events of the 20th century.”⁽¹⁶⁾ Early critics of the atomic decimation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki soon echoed the scientists' secret admonition to Truman. Absent from the discourse, however, were highly censored photographs of Nagasaki's destruction, which included the remains of a Catholic cathedral leveled by the blast. Thus, the true breadth of Nagasaki's moral ambiguity remained mostly buried under Allied Occupation censorship codes until long after the initial condemnation or validation, depending on the observer, of American science and wartime actions.

When “Fat Man”— the code name for the plutonium bomb — fell on Nagasaki, it detonated near Urakami Cathedral, the main center of worship for the Catholics in a city that had long held the largest number of parishioners in all of Japan. By the time the community had physically healed sufficiently enough to hold a memorial service, the more than eight thousand crosses commemorating those who perished in the bombing outnumbered the Catholics who now lived in ruins. The very existence of Christians in Nagasaki, not to mention their subsequent slaughter by a vocally Christian nation, negated the wartime denial, on both sides of the Pacific, of any spiritual commonalities between enemies. Although later censorship forbade the release of similar photographs, *Life* magazine released a picture by Bernard Hoffman of a statue of Christ’s head in the rubble of the cathedral; the caption questioned “whether even the urgencies of war should permit such violation of individual life as the atomic bomb had committed.”⁽¹⁷⁾ Such photographs and commentary presented the U.S. government and its citizens with a rather obvious contradiction, for it undermined the notion of the Japanese as pagans far removed from American religion and, for alert observers, criticized the notion that Providence might give one nation a weapon to use against fellow believers in a foreign nation. Indeed, as George Roeder Jr. argues, censors worked consciously to eliminate material that “reduced the cultural distance between Americans and Japanese.”⁽¹⁸⁾ Although some individuals, such as those working at *Life* magazine, appeared willing to question the validation of civilian suffering, the nation as a whole accepted Truman and his advisers’ well-crafted version of the war’s culmination over a “sub-human” land. In the wake of war, the nation “blessed” by God with the atomic bomb remained leery of any challenges to its victory narrative that restored humanity, let alone spirituality, to its former enemy.

Takashi Nagai voiced a Christian explanation for Nagasaki’s obliteration as a survivor of the attack. As a radiologist — a physician specializing in radiation treatment — Nagai became intimately aware of the horrors of nuclear warfare when his wife died from the bombing. Nagai’s own death from radiation poisoning followed in 1951. Renowned for his two books, *Leaving These Children*

and *The Bells of Nagasaki*, which only cleared Allied censors once it detailed U.S. intelligence information on Japanese-inflicted carnage in Manila, Nagai grappled with the meaning of nuclear holocaust and concluded that God's hand was present in the bombings.⁽¹⁹⁾ Nagai posited the following rhetorical question: "Was not Nagasaki the chosen victim, the lamb without blemish, slain as a whole burnt offering on an altar of sacrifice, for the sins of all nations during World War II?"⁽²⁰⁾ Memorialized as the "saint of Nagasaki," visited by Emperor Hirohito and Helen Keller, and honored by the Pope, Nagai gained the respect of his fellow citizens based not on his faith, but on his attempts to find meaning in destruction. Nagai's Christian struggle for purpose amid horror ultimately expressed a noteworthy contradiction to American concepts of providential intervention. While Truman imagined the bomb as divinely inspired retribution for Japan's transgressions, Nagai interpreted Nagasaki as an innocent sacrifice to cleanse the brutality inflicted by belligerent nations during war. Thus, Nagai's Christian beliefs provided a stark juxtaposition to those espoused by the U.S. Nagai's assertion that Japan was selected for special victimhood and "world-redemptive suffering clearly struck a resonant chord in the Japanese psyche" and in the growing secular pacifist movement.⁽²¹⁾ Survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki desperately hoped that an end to war might redeem the nuclear nightmare they lived daily, and anti-nuclear activists such as Hiroshima's mayor Shinzo Hamai worked toward this goal in the years following the blasts.⁽²²⁾

Many Americans also believed that a divine power selected their country for a special purpose. Following the leadership of their president, they witnessed God's will — firmly behind the American cause — in the creation and use of the atomic bombs. While observers on each side of the Pacific saw a similar tenet of the hand of God expressed by Nagai, those in the U.S. rarely viewed Hiroshima or Nagasaki as unblemished cities, but rather as perpetrators of war and evil. Radio news commentator H. V. Kaltenborn lauded the decidedly American achievement when he announced the atomic bombing of Hiroshima on NBC, although he added a caveat: "Anglo-Saxon science had developed a new explosive 2,000 times as destructive as any known before . . . For all we know, we have

created a Frankenstein!” Most Americans seemed willing to chance a rejuvenated Frankenstein in exchange for the resounding defeat of Japan and the end of World War II. As the *Omaha Morning World Herald* succinctly stated, “No tears of sympathy will be shed in America for the Japanese people.”⁽²³⁾ Of the 140,000 people who perished at Hiroshima 95 percent were civilians.⁽²⁴⁾ Consumed with vengeance, the U.S. remained unwilling to admit that the “enemy” might have included innocent women and children who merited mercy and that, by discounting their presence, the government trespassed against its long-held Christian morals. Even country music was not immune to the pervasive hatred of the Japanese that culminated in praise for the atomic bomb. Released in December 1945, the song “When the Atomic Bomb Fell,” written by Karl Davis and Harry Taylor, relied on religious imagery to condone the leveling of a city and its inhabitants:

Smoke and fire it did flow,
Through the land of Tokyo.
There was brimstone and dust everywhere.
When it all cleared away,
There the cruel Jap did lay,
The answer to our fighting boy’s prayer.⁽²⁵⁾

American religious intellectuals, including Reinhold Niebuhr, joined in the defense of Truman’s decision, weaving a much more complex justification of nuclear warfare than that found in popular music. Niebuhr, once a leftist pastor, became a “primary intellectual apologist for the Cold War” by the mid-1940s.⁽²⁶⁾ In “Our Relations to Japan,” published in *Christianity & Crisis* on September 17, 1945, Niebuhr condemned the Allied racism obvious in the Pacific War and warned against the arrogance of victory. Such admonitions did not preclude Niebuhr’s conviction that the war’s end complimented the mission of the divinely inspired American cause. “All this does not mean that our cause against either Germany or Japan was not ‘just,’” rationalized Niebuhr. “We were indeed the executors of God’s judgment yesterday. But we might remember the prophetic

warnings to the nations of old, that nations which become proud because they were divine instruments must in turn stand under the divine judgment and be destroyed.”⁽²⁷⁾ As the Cold War escalated, Niebuhr viewed nuclear warheads as evidence of “eternal human sin,” although he paradoxically argued that a truly evil opponent merited a nuclear response — part of the “Just War” doctrine — from the U.S.⁽²⁸⁾ In an unintentional echo of the lyrics from “When the Atomic Bomb Fell,” Niebuhr implied that Japan’s past cruelty negated the aftermath of American brimstone.

Others saw an entirely different interpretation of modern-day brimstone, and returned to Biblical stories to support their critique of contemporary orders that laid waste to two cities. *Christian Century* magazine published a Chicago Theological Seminary professor’s comparison of past and present atrocity: “King Herod’s slaughter of the innocents — an atrocity committed in the name of defense — destroyed no more than a few hundred children. Today, a single atomic bomb slaughters tens of thousands of children and their mothers and fathers. Newspapers and radio acclaim it a great victory. Victory for what?”⁽²⁹⁾ One woman proposed that the U.S. erred by refusing to warn Hiroshima’s citizens of their impending doom and should instead have imitated “the way the Lord conducted things at Sodom and Gomorrah” by providing “ample notice to the civilians of Hiroshima.”⁽³⁰⁾ These admonitions no doubt rankled Truman and his advisers who mulled over the possibility of inviting the Japanese to witness a test of the nuclear device over the human-free waters of the Pacific, but eliminated the option in favor of deploying the bomb over a city to maximize the shock and ensure surrender.

For those fighting in the Pacific, or those waiting for loved ones to return from that violent theater of war, the atomic bombs brought to a sudden end the carnage of the Pacific battles. Iwo Jima and Okinawa made significant inroads in the American psyche, and their death tolls not only stood at the forefront for military advisers as they deployed the bombs, but also dictated how many reacted to the newest weapons in the U.S.’s arsenal. A “thank God for the atomic bomb” attitude developed as those on the home front and on ships in the Pacific

realized that Allied troops would never launch a military invasion of mainland Japan. Ally Winston Churchill mirrored this rhetoric when he called the bombs a “deliverance.”⁽³¹⁾ Believing that God had indeed given their nation the “blessed bomb” according to a “divine plan,” many in the U.S. felt absolved from any moral or ethical dilemmas that might condemn the wholesale slaughter of enemy civilians.⁽³²⁾ Such an attitude paralleled the anti-Japanese sentiment that burgeoned throughout the Pacific war and, as Dower contends, “since it immediately brings God in on the American side, [it reminds] us *pari passu* that the Japanese are pagans.”⁽³³⁾ Accepting the bombs as a Providential gift, many Christians failed to see the paradoxes inherent in the weapon they assumed forced the reticent and heathen Japanese to surrender. Others lauded science but lamented the humans now charged with controlling it. Reverend Robert I. Gannon agreed that the atomic bomb was a “triumph of research,” but cautioned, “our savage generation cannot be trusted with it. Such power of destruction would have been a social hazard even in the civilized thirteenth century.”⁽³⁴⁾

The United States mobilized troops abroad and patriots at home by depicting the Allied fight to end the machinations of Nazi Germany as a “Good War” to preserve democracy in a world threatened by an evil poised to annihilate civilization. Indeed, Nazi Germany’s collapse confirmed the powerful righteousness of America’s mission for its citizens, who had long associated their nation “as the manifestation of Truth, Justice and Freedom placed on earth by a God whose purpose was to make of it an instrument for extending his spiritual and material blessings to the rest of humanity.”⁽³⁵⁾ The atomic bomb’s indiscriminate incineration of civilians, however, created a strained denouement for the “Good War.” Parallels between an apparent U.S. atrocity and the notorious terrors of Nazi death camps soon entered the debate about the morality of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Some, such as journalist, editor, and college president Felix Morley, suggested, “at Nazi concentration camps, we have paraded horrified German civilians before the piled bodies of tortured Nazi victims . . . It would be equally salutary to send groups of representative Americans to blasted Hiroshima. There, as at Buchenwald, are many unburied dead.”⁽³⁶⁾ Theologian

and pacifist A. J. Muste was even more direct: “If Dachau was a crime, Hiroshima is a crime.”⁽³⁷⁾ The revelations of the nature of Hiroshima unnerved those who firmly believed that the U.S. waged a “Good War” devoid of atrocity and had emerged victorious because its lofty ideals — blessed by God — triumphed over perpetrators of unimaginable evils. Minister John Haynes Holmes gave voice to this unease in yet another comparison to Nazi Germany: “The ghastly thing about this bomb is that it was released not by Hitler in some mad mania of lust, but by sane and good men who knew what it could do.”⁽³⁸⁾

Scientists and politicians stood equally divided as the aftermath of the bombings unfurled. A meeting between General Leslie Groves, director of the Manhattan Project, Truman, physicist Vannevar Bush, and military advisers in the days after Japan’s surrender hinted at the internal conflicts in the politics of war. As one of the scientists prepared to brief the group on the future use of nuclear weapons, he said, “I’m sorry it [the atomic bomb] worked.” A military official responded, “Amen.”⁽³⁹⁾ The “Good War” now held a disturbingly tainted legacy. Truman’s portrayal of a divine hand in American history grew muddled as prominent Christians and intellectuals refused to elevate his decision on moral high ground.

As noted, not all Americans passively allowed Truman to speak for God and tacitly endow the atomic bomb with nation-wide approval born of supernatural intervention. The August 17, 1945 issue of *U.S. News & World Report* included an article by its founder, David Lawrence, that unabashedly took President Truman’s announcement of the bombing to task. “God did not provide this new weapon of terror,” insisted Lawrence in a pointed rebuttal of Truman’s reasoning, “Man made it himself with the God-given brains and skill of the scientist.” Lawrence removed the aura of fate and divine guidance from the U.S.’s decision to deploy such an unimaginably ghastly weapon and returned the blame to those who built and dropped the bomb: “It is man and not God who must assume responsibility for this devilish weapon. Perhaps He is reminding all of us that manmade weapons can, if their use is unrestrained, destroy civilization, and that man still has the chance to choose between the destructive and constructive use

of the findings of science.” After returning human agency to the U.S.’s wartime behavior, Lawrence added, “Peoples must exercise the power that belongs inherently to them and must reason with each other through free governments and God-controlled statesmen.”⁽⁴⁰⁾

For each voice that condemned Truman another rose to glorify his leadership. Poet Edgar Guest’s stanza attempted to redeem Truman and venerate his advisers even as Lawrence undermined the President’s misguided, not to mention oversimplified, defense of nuclear holocaust:

The power to blow all things to dust
Was kept for people God could trust,
And granted unto them alone,
That evil might be overthrown.⁽⁴¹⁾

Others saw evil aplenty in the appropriation of Christian principles to defend a decidedly amoral act. In an article entitled “The Return to Nothingness,” published in *Human Events* on August 29, 1945, Morley echoed the July warning of Manhattan scientists as he forecasted the far-reaching after-effects Hiroshima held for America’s reputation at home and abroad. Noting the civilian death toll at the city’s center, Morley then traced the enduring cost of Truman’s decision. “Because perpetuated by a nation that calls itself Christian,” wrote Morley, “on a people with less lofty spiritual pretensions, eventual judgment may call our action ethically the more shameful, morally the more degrading, of the two [Pearl Harbor versus Hiroshima]. Unless we find some way of expiation, future missionaries to Japan will have difficulties in rationalizing the atomic bomb.”⁽⁴²⁾ Little did Morley suspect that the next wave of American missionaries to Japan would arrive at the behest of none other than General Douglas MacArthur, charged with the Allied Occupation of Japan and inspired by his own ideals of democracy’s foundations.

IV. Conclusion

When the Occupation neared its end, the gap between victor and vanquished narrowed, and the living Japanese regained humanity in the eyes of the conqueror. Reverend Kiyoshi Tanimoto, a peace activist and survivor of Hiroshima, toured the U.S. in 1951 to collect funds for the Hiroshima Peace Center. On February 5, as a guest of the U.S. Senate, Tanimoto gave a prayer to start the Senate's afternoon session. "We thank Thee, God," said the minister, "that Japan has been permitted to be one of the fortunate recipients of American generosity. We thank Thee that our people have been given the gift of freedom, enabling them to rise from the ashes of ruin and be reborn." Senator A. Willis Robertson responded that he was "dumbfounded yet inspired" that someone "whom we tried to kill with an atomic bomb came to the Senate floor and, offering up thanks to the same God we worship, thanked Him for America's great spiritual heritage, and then asked God to bless every member of the Senate."⁽⁴³⁾ This acknowledgement of faith in a shared God, paired with the deaths of 8000 Catholics in Nagasaki alone, compounded the unmerciful behavior by belligerents on both sides of the Pacific, for it disproved portrayals of "bestial" enemies through only one example of their commonalities. Those who perished at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, however, had yet to be granted a similar restoration of humanity in the overwhelming American narrative of Japan's surrender that depicted their sacrifice as undeniably legitimate and unequivocally moral.

Tanimoto's startlingly grateful prayer embodied religious interpretations used to give meaning to a bloody war and its aftermath. Moreover, it reflected the aftereffects of MacArthur's overt evangelism, so closely tied to the principles of democracy by both the general and by Truman. Tanimoto was a Christian long before MacArthur's arrival in Japan, yet his acknowledgment of the U.S.'s mission in its occupied territory indicated the prevalence of Truman's assumption that his country was "a shining city on a Hill," a beacon for democratic nations in the burgeoning Cold War. MacArthur's own brand of religious imperialism relied on similar notions of exceptional American democracy, grounded in the principles of Christianity, that accepted the atomic bomb as simply another

blessing from a God that not only favored the U.S. above “heathen” nations, but also expected its citizens to stand as examples for the world. Although MacArthur ostensibly failed to Christianize Japan, its stature as a newly liberated nation further solidified America’s belief in its exceptionalism and its right to lead the world in the Cold War’s ideological stalemate. Thus, the religious narrative that justified the atomic bombings, combined with MacArthur’s crusade in Japan, now formed the Cold War’s basis as “one of history’s great religious wars.”⁽⁴⁴⁾

Such a foundation was far from flawless. President Truman’s public claim to religious righteousness in the cataclysmic end of World War II did not resonate thoroughly with his American audience. Admittedly, Christian responses to the death of women and children at the birth of the nuclear age were often as varied as the nation-wide reactions to the secretive Manhattan Project’s earth-shattering debut. Many religious leaders, among others, criticized Truman’s use of the Almighty’s will to validate purposeful attacks on Japan’s civilian women and children. These reprimands, however, did not sufficiently undermine the soon to be immutable defense of nuclear war. Truman’s public justification of the bombings found permanent voice in the American acceptance of the incineration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as the 1995 conflagration over the National Air and Space Museum’s *Enola Gay* exhibit reconfirmed. Laura Hein and Mark Selden trace the enduring American assumption of its moral upper-hand in the “Good War:” “The insistence on American moral purity in official commemoration of the bombings and the end of the war has had enormous domestic as well as international implications. Every American president from Harry Truman to Bill Clinton has publicly rejected the idea that there could be any moral ambiguity regarding the killing of the civilian populations in the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, still less an obligation to apologize for that act.”⁽⁴⁵⁾ Historian Paul Boyer contextualizes the battle over the past, writing, “Hiroshima and Nagasaki are likely for the foreseeable future to remain the Banquo’s ghost of World War II, perennially challenging comfortable generalizations about the conflict and underscoring the disparity between the mythic past inscribed in popular memory and the past that is the raw material of historical scholarship.”⁽⁴⁶⁾

Truman's public bravado and rather flippant declaration that sub-humans merited no mercy — he did insist “When you have to deal with a beast you have to treat him as a beast. It is most regrettable but nonetheless true” — did not match his own private agony concerning the bombings. As leader of the first and only nation to instigate nuclear warfare, Truman turned to God to endow his decision with the moral legitimacy it so obviously lacked for numerous Americans. Privately, however, when separated from his role as commander and chief, Truman struggled with the enormity of the weapon and the moral ramifications of his decision.⁽⁴⁷⁾ It is Truman's hidden contemplation of nuclear warfare's aftermath that resoundingly negates the long-lived belief that the irradiation of hundreds of thousands of Japanese civilians never compromised the “Good War's” moral underpinnings. On August 10, 1945, the day after Nagasaki, Truman lamented the death of “all those kids.”⁽⁴⁸⁾ When enmeshed in the Berlin crisis in 1948, Truman confided to his advisers, as they debated the chain of command for atomic war declarations in the U.S., “I don't think we should use this thing unless we absolutely have to. It is a terrible thing to order the use of something that is so terribly destructive . . . You have got to understand that this isn't a military weapon. It is used to wipe out women and children and unarmed people, and not for military uses.”⁽⁴⁹⁾

Perhaps Truman's marking of a passage from Shakespear's *Hamlet*, quoted in one of the books about the atomic bombing in the president's personal collection, is most telling of a public figure's private concerns. Horatio narrates:

. . . let me speak to the yet unknowing world
How these things came about: So shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall'n on the inventors' heads
But let this same be presently perform'd

Even while men’s minds are wild; lest more mischance,
On plots and errors, happen. ⁽⁵⁰⁾

Given the unease, albeit private, of the president who ordered the deaths of over 200,000 Japanese civilians in the apocalyptic conclusion of the Pacific War, it remains disingenuous to present the American narrative of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as a sanctified end to a ghastly war. Many of Truman’s contemporaries took exception to a “God-given” defense of atomic warfare’s birth, yet moral overtones remained entwined in narrow understandings of the bombing and its contentious aftermath. In reality, the bomb lost its “blessed” aura as everyday Americans, theologians, and Manhattan Project scientists, among others, decried its use immediately after August 6 and 9, 1945. *Atomic Warfare and the Christian Faith*, published in 1946, voiced dissent with governmental validations of nuclear warfare: “We would begin with an act of contrition,” wrote the clergy contributing to the Federal Council of Churches report. “As American Christians, we are deeply penitent for the irresponsible use already made of the atomic bomb. We are agreed that, whatever be one’s judgment of the ethics of war in principle, the surprise bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are morally indefensible. . . . [W]e have sinned grievously against the laws of God and against the people of Japan.” ⁽⁵¹⁾ This sin, however, has yet to take root in the American narrative of the atomic bombings, which even when distanced from its original religious overtones, continues to justify the bombings as inherently moral.

Notes

- (1) See McCullough, p. 454.
- (2) See McCullough, p. 436.
- (3) See McCullough, p. 436, 442.
- (4) See Truman, p. 164.
- (5) See *Time* 20 August 1945, p. 9.
- (6) See Dower, “Three Narratives of Our Humanity,” p. 86.

- (7) See Dower, "Three Narratives of Our Humanity," p. 72.
- (8) See Dower, *War Without Mercy*, p. 163, 205.
- (9) See Dower, *War Without Mercy*, p. 193, 196, 258.
- (10) See Dower, *War Without Mercy*, p. 217.
- (11) See Hein and Selden, p. 11.
- (12) See Dower, *War Without Mercy*, p. 162.
- (13) See Russell, p. 1522.
- (14) See Kennedy, p. 810.
- (15) See Bird and Lifschultz, p. 554, 553. Notable names on the petition included Leo Szilard and Ralph E. Lapp.
- (16) See Sherwin, p. 1090.
- (17) See Roeder, p. 91.
- (18) See Roeder, p. 91.
- (19) See Wittner, p. 47; See Dower, "The Bombed: Hiroshimas and Nagasakis in Japanese Memory," p. 130.
- (20) See Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, p. 199.
- (21) See Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, p. 98; See Dower, "The Bombed: Hiroshimas and Nagasakis in Japanese Memory," p. 130.
- (22) See Wittner, p. 49.
- (23) See Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light*, p. 5, 12.
- (24) See Wittner, p. 35.
- (25) See Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light*, p. 13.
- (26) See Craig, p. 687.
- (27) See Niebuhr, p. 277. It is somewhat unclear what "yesterday" was in Niebuhr's article, although it seems likely that it is a reference to Japan's official surrender on September 2, 1945.
- (28) See Craig, p. 690.
- (29) See Boyer, *Fallout*, p. 10-11.
- (30) See Yavenditti, p. 288.
- (31) See Roeder, p. 89.
- (32) See Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light*, p. 211.
- (33) See Dower, "Three Narratives of our Humanity," p. 72.
- (34) See "Religion: The Atom: A Prayer," p. 77.
- (35) See Kirby, p. 392.

- (36) See Morley, p. 273. Morley’s Quaker background was undoubtedly influential in his critique of nuclear warfare and wartime atrocities.
- (37) See Boyer, *By the Bomb’s Early Light*, p. 219.
- (38) See Boyer, *By the Bomb’s Early Light*, p. 230.
- (39) See “The Periscope,” p. 13.
- (40) See Lawrence, p. 281-283.
- (41) See Boyer, *By the Bomb’s Early Light*, p. 211.
- (42) See Morley, p. 272.
- (43) See Hersey, p. 140-141. Hersey originally published *Hiroshima* in 1946. This Vintage edition includes a new conclusion written by the author as a follow-up study of the survivors he first interviewed.
- (44) See Kirby, p. 389.
- (45) See Hein and Selden, p. 13-14.
- (46) See Boyer, “Whose History Is It Anyway? Memory, Politics, and Historical Scholarship,” p. 139. The term “Banquo’s ghost” refers to Shakespeare’s tragic bloodbath *Macbeth*. Macbeth murders Banquo, a captain whom he once fought with for Duncan of Scotland, and Banquo’s ghost subsequently haunts the murderer.
- (47) See Boyer, *Fallout*, p. 33.
- (48) See Dower, “Triumphal and Tragic Narratives of the War in Asia,” p. 47.
- (49) See McCullough, p. 650.
- (50) See Dower, “Triumphal and Tragic Narratives of the War in Asia,” p. 47-48; See *Hamlet*, Act V, Scene 2.
- (51) See “Atomic Warfare and the Christian Faith: A Report by a Special Commission of the Federal Council of Churches,” p. 491.

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“Divine” Intervention

— American Religious Narratives of the Atomic Bombings, the End of the Pacific War, and the Allied Occupation —

〈Summary〉

Hilary Elmendorf

The American memory of World War II's end in the Pacific often portrays the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as a morally appropriate close to a horrifically violent war and suggests that “revisions” to that story, as witnessed at the Smithsonian's Air and Space Museum in 1995, obscure the reality of August 1945. Indeed, many Americans agreed with Truman's decision to introduce the world to atomic warfare, for they believed that it alone forced a reticent Japan to surrender. Using the lens of religious reactions to and portrayals of the atomic bombings, this paper contextualizes the complex and varied nature of American and Japanese responses to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. While many chose to recall the bombings as morally unambiguous and as righteously justifiable, viewing the bomb as given to the US by God, others responded instead with a critique of Truman's defense of the bombings; it is in this rejection of notions of American exceptionalism at the time of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that the truly contentious nature of the atomic bombings becomes apparent, demonstrating that no single victory narrative existed in 1945. Although censorship during the American Occupation of Japan attempted to put distance between the victors and the vanquished, photographs of Nagasaki's decimated Catholic cathedral nonetheless appeared in US periodicals, narrowing the gulf between the Japanese as “heathen” others and the Americans as Christians, and calling into question the US's wartime practice of bombing civilians. Some Americans responded with critiques of the US's purported Christianity that condoned atrocities, while others, such as Truman himself, used religion to condone the US's behavior.

This divergence, apparent in the 1940s, undermines the continued American memory of the bombings as an acceptable and uncontested end to the “Good War,” as no unified portrayal of the “blessed” atomic bomb existed in the days, weeks, or years after August 1945.