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## The Cold War and Heated Divides: Religious Proliferation

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## **The Cold War and Heated Divides:**

### *Religious Proliferation*

American history textbooks remember the Cold War for races in scientific development, proxy wars, and close calls between two competing empires: the “Space Race,” the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and the Cuban Missile Crisis. However, these books often omit the heated divide between the United States’ perception of their own religious ideologies versus those of the Soviet Union and the role that those sensitivities played during the Cold War. Through a close examination of the ideologies purported and the language used by American politicians amongst themselves and with the American public, it is my contention that the dichotomy between God-fearing Americans and the atheist communists played a prominent role in the American strategies and policies in fighting the Cold War. Specifically, America’s use of religion and religious rhetoric allowed the nation to gain allies across the globe, to assume the role of an active, international force of morality, and to transform the language of militant competition into a pursuit for peace.

Of the major ideas that drove American foreign policy during the Cold War, “containment” of the spread of communism by aligning (ideologically or militarily) with nations neighboring communist states was one of the most essential. And of all the proponents of containment, Harry Truman’s administration infused the ideology of containment with religion quite vividly and used religion to cultivate allies in the fight to contain communism (Kirby 77). In regards to creating containment as a religious ideology, let us begin with a secret – a top-secret document during the Truman administration called “NSC-68.” In 1950, the National Security Council articulated the

United States' devotion to a large-scale proliferation of weapons. More strikingly, NSC-68 even envisioned "an apocalyptic struggle between American good and Soviet evil." It advocated for the defeat of the "fanatic faith" of the communists by the organization of a "spiritual counter-force" to awaken "the latent spiritual energies of free men everywhere" (Kirby 1-2). Invoking religion to combat communism was outlined even in the nascent stages of the Cold War, and created an ominous sense of the imminent need to protect America's faith against the communists' "fanatic" one.

In Dianne Kirby's book, *Religion in the Cold War*, she recounts Truman's endeavors to persuade religious leaders around the world that communism was not just in the interest of American politics but also of protecting universal religious interest. Just as NSC-68 articulated, Truman proclaimed, "realize that a foe common to [us] all [is] trying to destroy [us] all" and that active cooperation of the leaders and the followers of the great religious faiths of the world...[can become] a vital force for...peace" (Kirby 77,79). Moreover, he proclaimed "tirelessly" that there was a fundamental divide between nations who "believed in God and morality, and those who did not" (Inboden 107).

By representing communism as atheistic and anti-religious, Truman was able to cry for anti-communism sentiment from not only American Christianity, but also to appeal to those religious leaders around the world. After much consideration of creating a "moral and spiritual offensive" to unite the world against communism, the Psychological Strategy Board, created furtively by Truman in 1951, sent a classified document to "the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Council, the Defense Department, and the State Department" detailing the ways in which religion could be used for "psychological operations." The memo instructed the departments that religion was a

useful instrument for fighting communism in a way that was “universally tremendous” and that these departments should globally pursue spiritual well-being because the threat of communism simply “could not exist in a spiritually healthy world” (Inboden 117-8). The notion of religion as a potent weapon in the fight against the Soviet Union was widespread throughout the American government and religious programming was broadcasted throughout the world on the government sponsored radio station, the “Voice of America” (*Cull 136*).

Perhaps one of the most symbolic and effective religious alliances that Truman sought was with the deeply anti-communist Pope Pious XII. In correspondence with the Pope, Truman wrote, “This Nation desires to march forward...with all men who unite their efforts to bring the Kingdom of God home to this fair earth [and] strive therefore ...to fulfill the prophecy of unity of world peoples under God.” And in concurrence with Truman, Pope Pious XII condemned communism as an encroaching force that required the opposition of all religious peoples (Kirby 80) (Inboden 111). Further, in this battle against Soviet communism and evil, Pope Pious XII considered the United States an “earthly saviour” (Kirby 80). Indeed, having God’s representative on earth made for a powerful ally. But potential providence aside, Kirby also speaks of the importance of this alliance in uniting Christianity around the world. Perhaps also due to Truman’s work with the World Council of Churches, there existed a sense of unity among Christians that was able to override issues of potential difference in alliance formation (Inboden 129). Kirby speaks of the suspicion that “left-leaning” Europeans had towards capitalism, and yet, the fact that Christianity represented a shared cultural and ideological connection allowed for a solidification of the alliances of those Europeans against communists. Moreover, the

unification of Western Europe as well as ecumenical unity had the ability to cause religious unrest behind the “Iron Curtain.” Indeed the Kremlin’s activity within the Russian Orthodox Church and the destruction of the Uniate Church pointed to the success of America’s religiously unifying efforts. Christianity and religion were more than ideological and rhetorical devices (though the notion of communism as a spreading contagion allowed religion to inoculate against the “virus” of communism and lend itself passionately to the language of containment) (Kirby 77,79). They were in fact global weapons used to launch and fuel the policy of geographical containment.

The support of the world’s religious leaders also gave a moral credibility to the United States’ involvement and actions within the Cold War. The Truman Doctrine, which stated America’ intent “to support free peoples...resisting attempted subjugation” and that international moral support allowed Truman to frame the Cold War as a conflict of global concern (Inboden 111). In fact, Kirby credits Truman with initiating an “abandon [of] isolationist” in the effort to “roll back communism” and thus the role of America as “special moral force in the world” (Kirby 1, 77).

Now, it is of great help to our understanding that even before the inception of America as we know it, there has been both a sentiment and a history of rhetoric that reflects the American enterprise as an exceptional and a Christian one. One might recall John Winthrop’s famous speech in 1630 as the Puritans headed for the New World, “We shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us; so that if we shall deal falsely with our God...we shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants” (“Source Watch”). Not only does Winthrop literally elevate the status of (what will become) America, but also it is quite apparent how heavily he draws from Jesus’ Sermon

on the mount. Jesus preached, "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid...let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven...(Matthew 5:14-16)." This language and sentiment of a "city upon a hill" has not only been used by John Winthrop, but has also been repeated and reworked by a range of American presidents from Abraham Lincoln to Ronald Reagan ("Source Watch"). Indeed, with attention to the very notion of America as a God-blessed nation all the way back to our Declaration of Independence, which "[Relied] on the Protection of divine Providence" (Cato, 14), the measure of America and Christianity's success are intertwined. In a mutually reinforcing cycle, the prosperity of Christianity and America in the world solidify both enterprises as "exceptional" and intrinsically "good" ones.

With the acknowledgement that our nation and its founding documents draw from Christianity, we can also begin to see the ways in which some American values are derived from Christianity as well. The very notion of spreading light and goodness (often taken to mean proselytizing) goes hand in hand with spreading democracy per the democratic peace theory, which states that two true democracies have never and will never go to war with one another. Furthermore, the idea of spreading this light and goodness as an example for others (in opposition to darkness and evil) for the sake of harmony on earth justifies America's involvement in international affairs. America fights for "good" in opposition of "evil" (the concept and tension of which are themselves mired in Christian theology). The Cold War was no exception.

The United States' involvement in Afghanistan serves as a wonderful example of this "divine" intervention. Throughout the Soviet Campaign of Afghanistan in the 1980's,

the United States covertly provided arms to the *mujahadim* (“jihadists”) or “holy warriors” who were fighting them. Though this support of Afghans makes perfect sense per the policy of containment, Ronald Reagan focused on the *mujahadim* for their righteous stand against tyranny and evil. In recognition of their struggle, which represented “man’s highest aspirations for freedom,” Reagan dedicated the 1982 launch of the Columbia to the people of Afghanistan (Reagan “Columbia”). One year later, in front of the National Association of Evangelicals, Reagan quoted Jefferson who said, “The God who gave us life, gave us liberty at the same time” (Reagan “Evil Empire”). Thus, we can see the further conflation of American freedom and liberty with God. Moreover, if the holy warriors of Afghanistan were fighting against the communists who tyrannically opposed both freedom and God, then the *Mujahadim* were fighting for both. America’s alignment with the religious opposition of communism emboldened both the righteousness of their anti-communist enterprise and the wickedness of communism itself. Religion could be harnessed as a force against communism, and the United States could intervene in other nation’s affairs under the guise (or possibly reality) of moral conviction.

Moving from the military to the scientific arena, an investigation of the “Space Race” reveals America’s perception as a leading spiritual force in the world and beyond. In 1957, The Soviet Union successfully launched “Sputnik” into orbit around earth. This Soviet success was a major blow to America and resulted in a panic that manifested itself nationally and internationally. At home, the United States sought to rigorously improve its math and science curriculums in public schools and then president, Eisenhower, established the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) in 1958.

Internationally, however, the issue of space was not simply about pride, it was a demonstration of ballistic capability to the international community. For the United States, failing in this demonstration resulted in the fear that unaligned nations might choose to ally with the Soviets who, based on the demonstration of Sputnik's launch, might appear more scientifically and militarily capable. To add to this panic, Lyndon Johnson claimed that the communist invasion of space was even more threatening to national security than Pearl Harbor. The fear of the Soviet ability to rain nuclear weapons down from the heavens was widespread (Johnson-Freese 35-7).

In short, if American exceptionalism reflected (or reflects) God's blessing, then the shortcomings of America on the international stage and the display of Soviet exceptionalism in space were understandably frightening. The proliferated imagery of nuclear weapons raining down from the sky and Lyndon Johnson's quoted refusal to acknowledge the Soviets as the "landlords of outer space," reflect a sense of imminent apocalypse (envisioned in NSC-68) and the anxiety that the Soviets might actually dominate space, and the earth from it. In these terms, with the vaguely religious undertones of apocalypse and domination from above, we can understand "Sputnik shock" as a reversal of the American religious agenda in the Cold War. We can therefore appreciate the exceptionalist implications of and the religious rhetoric with which John F. Kennedy resolved to go to the moon.

Speaking before a joint session of congress in May of 1962, Kennedy described the Space Race and the American endeavor to put a man on the moon as part of "the battle...between freedom and tyranny" (JFK "Congress"). In September of that same year he stood before the American people at the Rice University Football Field to promise that

man on the moon by the end of the decade. Kennedy described a rocket, “the length of this football field,” “made of new metal alloys, some of which have not yet been invented,” traveling “240,000 miles away” to “an unknown celestial body.” His almost incomprehensible description of traveling hundreds of thousands of miles away to an “unknown celestial body” in defiance of current human capabilities reflects an exceptionalist sense of the confidence in America’s super-human abilities and special relationship with the unknown above. Just like flying across the Atlantic, as Kennedy invoked, Americans push the limits of that which is humanely possible in order lead the world and to be that shining beacon of light (JFK “Moon”).

Two decades later, Reagan would take up the reigns of the American presidency and the responsibility for this American exceptionalism. As it pertained to space, he also relied on the language of America as a protector of the world. As the Space Race continued, and extraterrestrial devices gained increasingly deadly functionality, the need to counter these functionalities arose too. In March of 1983, President Reagan proposed, “What if...we could intercept and destroy strategic ballistic missiles before they reached our own soil or that of our allies?” Contemporary scientific capabilities aside, the concept of hoisting an “umbrella” of protection over the entire world, certainly resonates physically with the notion of America as a savior and religiously as an active and special moral force in the world (Johnson-Freese 32).

Kennedy and Reagan’s speeches embody deep-seated notions of good versus evil, freedom versus tyranny, and religion versus atheism. Kennedy’s invocation of that dichotomy in the Space Race, with America’s endeavor into space in the name of human accomplishment and protection was in opposition to the assumptions of Johnson and

Reagan that the Soviet endeavor was for the purpose of domination and destruction. Further, this language of freedom and free will for the purpose of getting closer to the unknown, as opposed to Soviet intention of plague-like destruction reaffirmed not only the dichotomy of good versus evil, but also Christ-like salvation versus anti-Christ-like Armageddon.

Thus, exceptionalist and religious idealization in the Space Race and the arms race, lent itself to the permissibility of America's actions and proliferation even if they were inherently the same as the Soviet's. In response to the Cuban Missile Crisis Kennedy concluded his speech, "Our goal is not the victory of might, but the vindication of right...and we hope, around the world, God willing, that goal will be achieved." This of course omitted the historical fact that prior to the Soviet shipment of weapons to Cuba, the United States was shipping weapons to Turkey. And yet, what may be seen as a defensive act by the Soviet Union turned into a "rapid offensive," the purpose of which "[could] be none other than to provide a nuclear strike capability against the western hemisphere." The Soviet intent is "might," the United States' is "the vindication of right." The Soviet Union's actions were a "reckless and provocative threat to world peace" whereas the United States' actions were, by nature of pursuing the moral cause, always in the interest of the peace and stability that the Soviets' threatened (JFK "Missile").

We have seen the ways in which Reagan, Kennedy, and Truman conceived of and spoke about an America that embodied righteousness and that spread that righteousness to the world to protect it from evil. William Inboden articulates in his book, *Religion and American Foreign Policy*, that the very idea of constructing this sense of moral order heavily draws on the Christian principle of "post-millennialism." The concept posits that

Christians should actively prepare for the second coming of Christ by “constructing a divine order on earth” rather than waiting for his return idly. Kennedy’s choice to simply put a man on the moon and Reagan’s “umbrella” of protection over the world in outer space both reflect America actively pursuing leadership in creating stability and harmony in the world through their scientific and military advancements.

Harry Truman believed in this sense of post-millennialism, perhaps, most passionately. He conceived of a new era for humanity due to the implications of the nuclear age: “The atomic bomb destroyed selfish nationalism...it ended one age and began another: the new unpredictable age of soul.” Whether rhetorical or personal, Truman outlines an age that is not predominantly defined by changes in geopolitical maneuvering, but instead, an age of spiritual contemplation. With the ability to literally dissolve the earthly and political barriers between people, Americans had to consider the ways in which they would construct their world with the transcendence their souls (Inboden 111). Conversely, the promulgated sense of a Soviet-created hell on earth due to nuclear proliferation is not only physically frightening, but it is also an attack on Christian ideology. Whereas the Christian narrative posits a day of divine Judgment and the Second Coming of Christ, thus bringing heaven on earth, the hellish depictions of Soviet intent surely renders them in devilish opposition to the faith of those Christians. Thus, even in the most threatening act to world stability, nuclear proliferation (unless one is a nuclear optimist), America was able to transform it spiritually.

America was never aggressor, only the protector. Kennedy even proclaimed that “the U.S...will never start a war” (JFK Never War). Nevertheless, the language and sentiment of exceptionalism, fighting for religious people around the world in the face of

an enemy that sought to take that religion away, gave the United States had the moral justification to build arms, fight proxy wars and, in what was a bipolar world, compete for global hegemony. Furthermore, we can see the potency of the religiously engrained ideas of American “good” and Soviet “evil.” Whereas the success of Sputnik, for example, was supposed to mean the superiority of the Soviet Union in the arms race, it was actually the Americans who were ahead in missile stockpiling. The concept of the righteous versus the wicked and the Godless Soviet’s destructive intent with the weapons build-up was more important and believable to the American public than clear scientific observations of America’s own ballistic technology that could have diffused part of the panic (Johnson-Freese 36). Thus, we can see the ways in which the benevolence of American religion was framed to oppose Soviet atheism and malevolence in such a way that it could obscure reality.

The Cold War, with all of its competitions, proxy wars and close calls, never became hot. Therefore the most important weapons in “winning” the war, were the potency of ideas. Whether propaganda made use of religion, or religious ideology made use of propaganda, it cannot be denied that religion played a prominent role in the American tactics and success in the Cold War. The immixing of America and its Christianity with the “good,” with freedom, with liberty, and with salvation is as genius as it is intrinsic to the fabric of the American belief system. Thus, the Americans as a God-blessed moral force in opposition to a Godless enemy, hell-bent on world domination was not only physically and psychologically threatening, but also spiritually ominous. Therefore, in the Cold War, America identified religion as a common ground to strengthen and create alliances that transcended cultural and political differences, whether

with other Christians across the globe or Islamic warriors in Afghanistan. It provided the means to intercede in world affairs in the name of the just cause of protecting the world from evil and tyranny, and those same concepts allowed for the scientific and military competition with capabilities just as destructive as the Soviet's. The difference was in spirit.

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