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Competing “isms” among Post-War Southern Baptists

A Case of Religious Nationalism versus Christian Universalism

As European empires lost political control of their colonies in the wake of World War II, evangelical Christians in the United States saw an aggressively expanding Communism become a new archenemy, and they countered by redoubling their missionary efforts. To bolster those efforts, Southern Baptists embarked on a sustained effort of missionary education dedicated to a view of Christian Universalism which promoted the “sameness” and “oneness” of all peoples around the world. That mission education, however, competed with the denomination’s concurrent tendency to conflate “Christian” and “American” as they strove to inculcate in their youth a clear understanding of how and why the United States was both different from, and better than, the Communist nations of the world.

Southern Baptists missionary efforts in Africa cast these competing ideas in stark relief. The staunchly anti-communist South of the Southern Baptists was also the segregated South. There, Christian nationalism and Christian universalism collided.

History of a Christian Nation

For Southern Baptists, America was a Christian nation because of its Christian heritage. Helen Conger prepared a history lesson for the Junior Girls Auxiliary in September of 1949, recommending that the leader show a picture of the Pilgrims while explaining to the girls, “Our country is beautiful because it was established by people who came to worship God.” Conger suggested continuing with, “We have a wonderful heritage. The Constitution is based on the Bible. The Liberty Bell has part of a verse of Scripture on it,” and ending with a reading from Leviticus.¹

Notably, as Conger’s comments suggest, the Baptist version of American history began at Plymouth—not Jamestown—under the guiding hand of God. Norman Cox and C. Aubery Hearn wrote in the *Baptist Training Union Magazine* that “few people understood that God held back the

colonization of our Atlantic Seaboard until the first hour when he had a people who could come here with an open Bible in their hands."ⁱⁱ

Religious liberty lay at the core of a Christian America; but, as the Baptists clearly understood, it did not simply arrive fully developed with the Mayflower. Religious intolerance in the Puritan colonies gave rise to the most salient event in the Baptist history of America: the founding of Rhode Island. Penrose St. Amant explained, "the freedom that comes from the Gospel broke forth anew in Rhode Island, founded by Roger Williams and contributing greatly to the development of the democratic ideal in America."ⁱⁱⁱ Williams, indeed, was the true hero of the Baptist version of American history.

Saxon Rowe Carver, writing for *The Window*, a publication for the Young Woman's Auxiliary, explained Roger William's place in American history was certain: "all authorities agree that Roger Williams heads the list of American founders of religious freedom." But Carver's story did not end there, as she assured readers that "the constitution of the United States embodies many of the ideas of early Rhode Island."^{iv} Like Carver, Charlotte Tedder Swift, writing for the *Baptist Training Union Magazine*, reminded Juniors that the Constitution guaranteed freedom of religion, which the colony of Rhode Island had been the first to establish. She ended her program notes with a prayer: "that we may appreciate religious freedom in our country and work for religious freedom around the world" thus tying the dedication to a particular version of the past to a call for action in the present.^v

Freed from any academic concerns for "coverage," Baptists selected the episodes which most clearly demonstrated America's Christian heritage. From Roger Williams, they leapt ahead to George Washington, and they presented a very specific image of Washington kneeling in prayer at Valley Forge. Southern Baptists virtually ignored the rest of Washington's military and political career.

Valley Forge provided evidence of God's guiding hand in history. Bettye Flo Attebery, who won the speakers tournament for Young People at the Ridgecrest Assembly in the summer of 1946, brought the Pilgrims and Valley Forge, as well as Jamestown, symbolically together. She said, "As we think of the history of our nation, time and time again we are reminded of God's constant protective care. In

hours of oppressive trial we have felt the delivering power of his boundless grace, as at Valley Forge, Jamestown, [and] Plymouth. We somehow forget to realize that God is actually in history, that with his mighty arm he is keeping watch over his own."^{vi} If God had chosen the Americans to watch over as his own against the Christian and, for the time, liberal British two centuries earlier, surely God would make the same choice against the atheistic, authoritarian Soviets.

Valley Forge was symbolic, but without the firm establishment of religious liberty victory in the Revolutionary War might have fallen short of its role in God's plan for America. In the July 1945 program for eight-year-olds, Training Union recommended placing a picture of Thomas Jefferson and Monticello alongside a map of Egypt, the wilderness, and the Promised Land in an effort to increase interest in the Biblical story of Moses.^{vii} America was the Promised Land, free of the intellectual slavery of a hierarchical state church or of Communism and dedicated to the greatest of all freedoms, religious liberty; and Thomas Jefferson had been America's Moses.

The Training Union also actively employed the much-later-acquired-Statue of Liberty in creating the nation's symbolic history. The organization's official poster for July, 1955 featured the Statue of Liberty above an open Bible with the caption, "from the New Testament comes our national concept of freedom."^{viii} The Intermediate Training Union program for July 1957 revolved around a girl draped as the Statue of Liberty with a hidden voice reminding the intermediates that "Christ has given his all to make America the land of the Free."^{ix}

A Christian Nation in the Cold War

God's guiding hand had lead America to be the "land of the free" but maintaining that freedom was an ongoing obligation. Helen Conger introduced her September 1949 program by making the connection between history and the Cold War when she instructed counselors to use history lessons to show the girls "how we can strengthen our nation from within by being Christian" so that "communism will have no chance with our people."^x John L. Hill mirrored this idea in his article "Reflecting the Faith in Citizenship."

Hill emphasized “the government was inaugurated according to the principles of the Bible; its teaching found expression in the political principles and framework of our government of free people” and encouraged Baptists to read the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, along with biographies of Washington, Jefferson and Madison. Tying their achievements to the Cold War, Hill wrote “Today ours, the strongest country in the world, is the only nation resting solidly upon principles of liberty, freedom, and equality of rights for all citizens. It is our privilege to preserve this heritage, and in better spirit can we do it by exemplifying the faith of our founding fathers.”^{xi}

Some people, Mary Dobbins suggested, believed that America’s position was secure; they believed that America was too strong to be destroyed. Such belief was folly. She reminded readers that the ancient Israelites had believed themselves invulnerable; thus, they ignored the warnings of the prophet Amos. A mere thirty years later their nation was a shambles. Dobbins asked “what has God done for our land in the past? How grateful are we now? Is the nation as a whole a Christian nation or indifferent toward the church.”^{xii}

The threat to America came, of course, from Communism, and a more Christian America was the only answer. J. B. Lawrence told readers of *Home Missions* that “the answer to Communism and all the isms that infest and infect civilization today is the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.” The Training Union reiterated that same theme throughout the Cold War years. Notably, the intent of the Intermediate Union lessons for November of 1955 was to encourage a discussion “of the religious aspects of communism, as compared with the freedom of our country.”^{xiii}

For her program for Intermediate Girls’ Auxiliaries in November of 1956, Helen Fling presented a fictional interview about religious freedom in Communist countries. After establishing that both Russia and China denied Baptists freedom of worship, the GA interviewer concluded that the interview left her “wanting to do more than just write” and the denominational leaders assured her that she could do much more: she could, in fact, support the missionary program through the Lottie Moon offering.^{xiv}

Communism and Christianity in the Battle for Africa

The Lottie Moon offering supported Baptist mission efforts abroad, in the battlefield against communists. Communism was a formidable foe as it offered oppressed peoples false hopes, and denied that Christianity could offer true hope. H. Cornell Goerner, professor of Missions at the Southern Baptist Seminary, reminded Baptists that Communists promised that they would eliminate all racial distinction and give freedom to those who still, even after two world wars, labored under the yolk of colonialism. Goerner believed that "a new Africa is in the making," and it was up to Christians to offer the way of Christ and peace for overcoming the legacy of racism and colonialism. Communism, he believed, offered alternative way of overcoming that legacy, the way of "bloody revolution, bitterness, and hatred." Missionaries in the field, however, faced the problem of being associated with the past and imperialism rather than with the future and freedom, despite the fact that most supported African independence from European political control.^{xv}

The historical association between Christianity and white domination of Africa had to be broken lest it become an even more powerful weapon in the Communist arsenal. The Foreign Mission Board informed Baptists that Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev called for the expulsion of missionaries from Africa. Khrushchev said, "missionaries are the agents of formerly imperialistic nations which are using them in an attempt to reconquer their lost colonies." Baptists, however, believed that Communist leaders were really concerned about the possibility of mission successes. Hermione Dannelly Jackson, writing for *The Window*, recognized that Communists wanted an end to Christian missions but offered different reasons from those put forth by Khrushchev. She argued, "Communists recognize the mission movement as a bond of good will between the people they seek to control and the United States." Baptists were not expelled from Africa; instead, their program expanded.^{xvi}

Mission Education and Africa

While their historical programs highlighted America's special position in the world, Southern Baptist mission education efforts encouraged Baptist youth to build bridges with youth around the world, especially through the "Pen Pal" programs. Both the Royal Ambassadors and the Girls' Auxiliary

provided addresses to readers who wanted to begin a correspondence. Myra Nell Noyes of Brunswick, Georgia, began corresponding with Abiola Adewole of Nigeria as a member of the Auxiliary, and continued for several years. When Adewole got married, Noyes sent her a white Bible, the traditional wedding gift given to members of the Auxiliary.^{xvii}

“Pen Pal” correspondence provided a direct link across the ocean, but mission leaders realized that not every youth in America would engage in such an exchange, so magazines for youth continued to promote understanding through their articles. J. I. Bishop, director of the Royal Ambassador program, wrote that “Nigeria is filled with boys who, if transplanted to the United States of America, would be just like hundreds of Royal Ambassadors here. . . . Under the skin, they are *just like you*.”^{xviii}

Some young Baptists were able to gain more direct cross-cultural experiences. One student from Memphis State University, Patsy Parker, traveled to Ghana for the dedication of a Baptist hospital. Several Africans asked Parker why young women in America would want to build a hospital thousands of miles away. Parker answered: “in our mission organizations we have studied the needs and opportunities in Ghana for proclaiming the name of Jesus.” Mission education in America built a hospital in Ghana that would minister to both the spirit and the body.^{xix}

Advance in Africa

The mission education, pen pal, and hospital building programs were all part of an effort to expand the missionary presence in Africa during the Cold War. L. Howard Jenkins, president of the Foreign Mission Board, told Southern Baptists: “In Africa, the possibilities seem unlimited. The doors are wide open.” When Jenkins wrote in 1945, Baptists had only 45 missionaries to Africa, all in Nigeria. Jenkins prodded Baptists, saying, “we must send many more to Africa.” By 1965, their efforts had increased tenfold, with 447 Southern Baptist missionaries working in 83 cities and towns across 10 African nations.^{xx}

As regional secretary for Africa, George Sadler emphasized that continent’s importance in the post-war world. He noted that, “the part of the globe that was known for many years as the ‘Dark

Continent' is speedily claiming its rightful place in the scheme of things that . . . we have the courage to call 'one world.'" Missions, Sadler believed, would play a vital role in shaping post-war Africa.^{xxi} Success was imperative. George Sadler noted "we have grave misgivings about the future of an un-Christian Africa," which could succumb to Communism. Missionaries had long been in the lead of educational efforts in Africa. Missionaries recognized that the rising expectations of African leaders were, at least in part, a product of those efforts.^{xxii}

Mission schools played an important role in much of sub-Saharan Africa. Nigeria serves as an example: in 1951, the Baptists enrolled 31,000 students in their schools, accounting for nearly ten per cent of all Nigerians attending school. Samuel A. Lawoyin, a Nigerian Baptist studying at Virginia Union University explained that World War II had awakened both nationalism and the desire for education. Imperialists would not offer education to the Africans, he said, because their paramount interest was to exploit the continent's resources with "very little or no regard for the people." The remaining educational choices, Lawoyin believed, were between the Communists or the Christian missions. Baptist leaders in America and Africa hoped and prayed that Communists would not gain control of the continent during the turmoil of unprecedented changes brought by independence. Christian schools, they believed, would play a key role in keeping Communism – and Islam – at bay. As Cal Guy argued, "the African of tomorrow will be Mohammedan, Communist, or Christian depending on who teaches him to read."^{xxiii}

Contradiction of Segregation

Missionaries were caught in the middle of a tense racial situation that emerged with the end of colonialism. Communism exploited racial and economic tensions, created discontent, and, perhaps most importantly, denied the relevance of Christianity and the very existence of God. Racial tensions in America were easy for Communists to exploit because technology allowed increasingly rapid communications; whatever happened in America made world-wide headlines and had world-wide implications.

Joanna Maiden, a medical missionary in Nigeria, related an exemplary incident to Southern Baptists shortly after the integration of the University of Georgia, which involved a riot. Maiden noted that a young ward assistant asked her if Georgia was an important place in the United States. While she did not provide readers of *The Commission* with her answer, she wrote, "perhaps a native Georgian could have answered him more gracefully than I did, but I am asked similar things about Virginia, my home state, and I can't answer without embarrassment." Similarly, Sydney Pearce, who served in Kenya, hoped Americans, and in particularly Baptists, would quickly find a solution to the nation's race problem. She asked, "when will Southern Baptists become outraged enough over the oppression taking place in our country that they will correct this thing which has now become an actual hindrance to the work of the Lord around the world."^{xxiv}

Missionaries frequently wrote for Baptist publications, trying to push Baptists to recognize the international implications of the American racial situation and the damage it did to their evangelical efforts. Nevertheless, the most direct challenge the Baptist mission effort presented to segregation came in the form of African Christians, many of whom were mission converts, who came to the United States to study. Some, like Ed Reynolds and Sam Oni presented their challenge by applying to segregated Southern Baptist universities. Others, like Adbokun Oshoniyi and Bisi Adegbile, sought membership in Southern Baptist churches during their stay in the United States. Regardless, their presence and their insistence on being accepted as brothers and sisters in Christ forced Southern Baptists to consider the implications segregation had for their missionary effort. While their efforts could be protracted, they typically met with some degree of success.^{xxv}

Wake Forrest desegregated to admit Reynolds and Mercer desegregated to admit Oni. Nevertheless, not all Southern Baptists were convinced. After Sam Oni applied to Mercer University, W. J. Thurmond, argued if the success of mission activity was "contingent upon the admission of this Negro student to Mercer, then I also say let's call all our missionaries home." Others, however, were willing to reconsider their position. Jack Carpenter of Dahlonoga wrote, "my good friends and brethren will

understand and forgive me if I say that, in spite of my middle-age conservatism, I cannot help but gag at the idea of excluding a young African convert from our beloved Mercer simply because God gave him dark skin." ^{xxvi}

Not all efforts succeeded. Three years after Sam Jerri Oni arrived at Mercer, he twice attempted to worship at Tattnall Square Baptist Church. He was rebuffed both times. Oni felt obligated to tell the church that "their segregationist policy was torpedoing their own mission program in Africa."^{xxvii}

Still, the debate at Westside Baptist Church in Gainesville, Florida was even more indicative of the difficulties created by Jim Crow Christianity in the Cold War years. The problem revolved around Johncyna Williams, an African American student at the University of Florida and member of the institution's Baptist Student Union. Her attendance with BSU members at the otherwise all-white Westside caused those members who opposed integration to demand the church's planning committee do something. The debate reflected several themes that the progressive Baptist leadership had stressed during the Cold War years, notably the international dimensions of the race question. As one noted member asked, "how can we send missionaries to Africa and then discriminate against the American Negro." Williams' case was different because she was not an African, but an African American, thus at Westside the congregation realized the treatment of African American could no more easily be severed from missions than the treatment of foreign students from Africa. The congregation determined to accept any Christian regardless of race, with about one-fourth dissenting.^{xxviii}

Conclusion

Southern Baptists presented their youth a version of American history which highlighted the special role of America as a Christian—even chosen—nation with a God-ordained mission in the world. The same leadership presented youth a version of the world which stressed the oneness of the world. While the two messages had a certain intellectual coherence as Southern Baptist leaders saw the American mission as creating a unified Christian world. Nevertheless, the two messages—the special place of American and the unity of the world—carried with them certain contradictions and certain

challenges. In the end, the challenge of racial division in the United States would have to be overcome for Christian universalism to overcome Christian nationalism.

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- ⁱ Conger, "Christ the Answer to Godless Ideas," *World Comrades* (September 1949) 20
- ⁱⁱ Norman Cox and C. Aubrey Hearn, "How to Observe Baptist Heritage Week," *Baptist Training Union Magazine*, (April, 1958) 14
- ⁱⁱⁱ Penrose St. Amant, "Christianity and History," *The Baptist Student* (May 1953) 6.
- ^{iv} Saxon Rowe Carver, "Programs, 2nd Week: Sounds of Jubilee," *The Window of the YWA* (March 1959) 32-33.
- ^v Charlotte Tedder Swift, "Roger Williams and America's First Baptist Church" *Baptist Training Union Magazine* (July 1961) 49.
- ^{vi} Bettye Flo Attebery, "Christ Above All in Our Citizenship," *Baptist Training Union Magazine* (January 1947) 26
- ^{vii} Mrs. Emmett Golden, "Consider Your Eight-Year-Olds," *Baptist Training Union Magazine* (July 1945) 40.
- ^{viii} C. Aubrey Hearn, "This Month's Poster," *Baptist Training Union Magazine* (July 1955) 20.
- ^{ix} Sara Hine, "Assembly Program for Intermediates," *Baptist Training Union Magazine* (July 1957) 34.
- ^x Conger, "Christ the Answer to Godless Ideas," *World Comrades* (September 1949) 20.
- ^{xi} John L. Hill, "Reflecting Faith in Citizenship," *Baptist Training Union Magazine* (July 1954) 4.
- ^{xii} Mary Dobbins, "Program, 3rd Meeting: Right in Our Own Backyard," *The Window of the YWA* (July 1952) 36-37.
- ^{xiii} "15 and 16 Intermediate Union Lessons – 1955" Jerry Elmer Lambdin paper Box 2, folder 15, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville, TN.
- ^{xiv} Helen Fling, "first Intermediate Meeting: Our Freedom, Their Bondage" *Tell* (November 1956) 31-32.
- ^{xv} H. Cornell Goerner, "Meetings for Intermediate Royal Ambassadors, fourth intermediate meeting: Communism and World Missions," *AL*, 4:3 (September 1949): 18.
- ^{xvi} Khrushchev quoted in "Foreign Mission News," *Commission* 27:7 (July 1964): 28; Hermione Dannelly Jackson, "Program: headaches in the Far East," *Window* 23:3 (November 1951): 33.
- ^{xvii} "Pen Pals," *AL* 11:1 (June, 1956): 5; "Pen Pals," *AL* 12:6 (November 1957): 6; "News and Views," *Window* 33:1 (February 1961): 19.
- ^{xviii} J. I. Bishop, "There's No Difference Under the Skin," *AL* 7:6 (November 1952): 6; "Royal Ambassador Activities in Nigeria and the Gold Coast," *AL* 6:11 (April 1952): 4-5; J. I. Bishop, "Nigerian Boys Go To School, Too," *AL* 7:5 (October 1952): 4-5.
- ^{xix} Patsy Parker, "Why? Why? Why?," *Window* 30:8 (April, 1959): 14-6.
- ^{xx} L. Howard Jenkins, "Foreign Missions in Spite of War," *Commission* 11: 3 (March 1945): 1; "Africa's 'Remarkable Progress' Noted," *Commission* 24:3 (March 1965): 36.
- ^{xxi} Sadler, "Report," MFMB (October 8, 1954).
- ^{xxii} Sadler, "Report," MFMB (April 30, 1949); Sadler, "Report" MFMB, (April 10-11, 1956); W. O. Carver, "What Hope," *Commission* 11:3 (March 1948): 20.
- ^{xxiii} Mills, "All Things to All Men" 4-5; Elizabeth Ferguson, "Epistles," *Commission* 13:6 (June 1950): 21; Cal Guy, "Meetings for Intermediate Royal Ambassadors, third intermediate meeting: What Of Our First Hundred Years in Africa?," *AL* 5:2 (July 1950): 16; George W. Sadler, "Students in Nigeria," *BS* 29:6 (March 1949): 4-5.
- ^{xxiv} Joanna C. Maiden quoted in "Foreign Mission News," *Commission* 20:6 (June 1961): 12. ; Sydney Pearce, "Epistles," *Commission* 26:8 (September 1963): 16.
- ^{xxv} Alan Scot Willis, "Our Preaching Has Caught Up With Us: Exploring the Impact of Southern Baptist Missions in Africa on the Southern Baptist Heartland," *World History Bulletin* (Spring 2007) 37-38.
- ^{xxvi} "Majority of Letters Favor Admitting Ghanaian," *Christian Index*, March 7, 1963, 3; "Missionary Agrees," *CI*, March 14, 1963, 7; "Differ on Ghanaian," *CI*, April 11, 1963, 8.

^{xxvii} "Alan Scot Willis, *All According to God's Plan: Southern Baptist Mission and Race, 1945-1970* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005) 180.

^{xxviii} John W. Touchberry, "The Westside Story," *The Baptist Student* (June 1964): 27-8. See also Trillin, *An Education in Georgia*, 176-9.