

CHAPTER SEVEN
CRUSADERS AGAINST COMMUNISM,
WITNESSES FOR PEACE
Religion in the American West and the Cold War

MARK STOLL

In 1952 the Korean War still raged. The United States and the Soviet Union were testing and expanding their nuclear arsenals. The specter of Communist spies and infiltrators haunted the nation. That year Hollywood released a movie of H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds*. Set in California among a painfully wholesome group of Americans, the film captured in a science-fiction story popular fears about invasion, the terrors of modern war, and annihilation of civilians and civilization. Invincible invading Martians with their heat rays destroyed everything in their path. But whereas the only religious figure in Wells's novel had been a curate gone mad, Hollywood made religion the film's central theme. In one scene, for example, a venerable clergyman from the "Community Church" walks toward the menacing Martians, reciting the Twenty-third Psalm and holding aloft a Bible with a gleaming silver cross on its cover, only to be incinerated by their heat ray. Later, when the Martians attack Los Angeles, its streets are empty-the population is in the city's houses of worship praying for a miracle. At the exact moment when the Martians aim their weapons at the churches, they die-struck down by bacteria, against which they have no immunity. The narrator concludes that mankind had been saved by the littlest things that God had put on this earth, and the film ends with a hymn. The moral of this Cold War morality play was that God, and only God, could save the United States against an enemy who was not only godless but rejected the offer of redemption-an enemy such as the Communist Soviet Union.

The Cold War signified many things: a political rivalry between two great powers; an economic competition; an arms race; a struggle for global influence. But Americans did not generally think about the Cold War in terms of naked

struggle for world dominance between to self-interested nations. The Cold War for most Americans was a moral confrontation with the earthly embodiment of evil, a struggle for the world's hearts and minds-and souls. With World War II, a "good war" against manifest evil, fresh in memory, inevitably Americans imagined the Cold War as a contest between Christian (and Jewish) democratic liberty and atheist totalitarian slavery.

Westerners had a distinctive impact on American religion during the Cold War, even though the West does not, like the South, have a distinctive regional denominational character. The geographical denominational distribution across the West corresponds to historical migration patterns. Some northern churches spread in a band from the Midwest to the Northwest, while conservative denominations associated with the "Okies" are strongly represented in the Southwest and Southern California. Strong in much of the West (70 percent of American Catholics live west of Denver), the Roman Catholic Church benefits from the region's proximity to Latin America and predominates along a broad swath that stretches across the Southwest from San Francisco to Brownsville, Texas. Mainly migrants from New York, western Jews are primarily urban, with a particularly large presence in Los Angeles. Unique among western denominations, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, or Mormon church, dominates only one region, in and around Utah, in the heart of the West.

That no one church characterizes the West does not mean, however, that the West has no real religious identity. Strong individualists, western Protestant believers tend less to be churchgoers and have weaker denominational identification, while western Jews have more of a cultural than a religious identity. Due in part to their individualism, westerners have a greater tendency to take up more extreme positions on the religious right or left. Isolation of West Coast denominations from the rest of the nation has also tended to make sectarianism more exaggerated. Consequently, western religious responses to the Cold War have been particularly extreme, prominent, and vocal.

The issues of the Cold War, of course, had no sectional boundaries. All major American denominations are national, and no significant religious group exists solely in the West. On the institutional level, the religious response to the Cold War is a national one. Nevertheless, many western individuals, churches, movements, and actions made their distinctive marks on the religious history of the Cold War in America.

One thing to note about the religious response to the Cold War is that a brief history such as this one can be misleading, particularly about gender issues. Probably due to the weight of religious history, practically no women appear in the leadership of major religious organizations. But on both the religious right and left, women usually make up the majority of members, and

sometimes the great majority. Women also often operate as lieutenants and organizers in groups and movements ranging from Robert Thieme's ministry to Sanctuary.

Religious response to the Cold War breaks into three general periods. In its earliest phase, from World War II to the early 1960s, religious bodies united nearly unanimously behind the effort to contain "godless Communism." A second period followed Vatican II's condemnation of nuclear weapons and modern war, which inspired other denominations to rethink their support of American Cold War policy. Religious opposition to American Cold War policies increased throughout the Vietnam War era. Deep polarization of the religious community on foreign policy issues characterized the third period, from the late 1970s to 1989, when President Ronald Reagan revitalized Cold War rhetoric and policy with the enthusiastic backing of the religious right, but without the religious unanimity of the 1950s.

CRUSADING AGAINST COMMUNISTS, 1949-1963

For most religious leaders in the 1940s, there was no hesitation about linking arms in a common front against the Communists. Not only did Communist totalitarianism threaten virtually every traditional American value, it was officially atheist and materialist. Prewar radicals and participants in the peace movement fell silent or climbed aboard the anti-Communist bandwagon. Mormons and Catholics, two groups who had traditionally distanced themselves from the American government and its foreign policies, adopted "hyper-American" conservative foreign policy views. Protestants held greater diversity of opinion than other religious groups. They disagreed whether the Communist challenge called for a worldwide revival of religion as a potent means to combat it, or whether Communism was a moral challenge to the United States that it should meet by helping other nations with their social and economic problems. A very small number, mostly liberal Protestants like the liberal Quakers, objected to containment and American militarism as unchristian, and saw no ideological or political threat in Communism. Black Protestants tended to be far more liberal on foreign policy issues than White Protestants of the same education and income, if about on par with White Protestants as a whole, yet their primary interest in social issues directed their activity away from foreign policy concerns.

Beginning after World War II and culminating with the election of the nation's first Catholic president, John F. Kennedy in 1961, Catholics felt themselves fully accepted as Americans for the first time in American history. Will

Herberg's *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* expressed the widely held view that in prosperous 1950s America, these historically antagonistic religions all were paths to "American" values. A long tradition of hyper-Americanism rooted in a desire to be accepted as Americans combined with an absence of a Catholic dissenting tradition to make Catholics enthusiastic Cold Warriors. The vigorous prewar Catholic peace movement, led by Catholic-convert Dorothy Day's Catholic Worker movement, practically disappeared. Catholics avidly supported fellow-Catholic Senator Joseph McCarthy's ceaseless pursuit of Communists in government. Church hierarchy quickly applied to the Cold War the traditional "just-war" theory that it had used to justify World War II. Communist action against the Church in heavily Catholic Eastern Europe hardened attitudes further. A strong foe of Communism, Pope Pius XII in 1949 excommunicated all Catholics who supported Communism and later linked pacifism with Communism. Catholic conservatism was so strong that well into the Vietnam War, Catholics took conscientious objector status in disproportionately low numbers.

Fundamentalist Protestants were especially disposed to see the Cold War in terms of good and evil and in terms of Armageddon, the final battle between good and evil before the Second Coming of Christ. After the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, fundamentalists had not immediately attached great significance to the Soviet Union. As Communism's appeal grew during the crisis of the Depression, Russia loomed as a greater menace and assumed the form of the embodiment of evil that it retained for fundamentalists throughout the Cold War. As early as 1931, leading Texas fundamentalist J. Frank Norris preached a sermon entitled, "The World-Wide Sweep of Russian Bolshevism and its Relation To The Second Coming of Christ." The atomic bomb whipped conservative Protestants into an apocalyptic fervor and greatly increased Protestant interest in the prophetic portions of the Bible. A number of verses seemed to foretell nuclear warfare, the most widely quoted being II Peter 3:10: "The heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up." Other passages appeared to refer to Russia and other contemporary nations. The end-time theory which fundamentalists favored, premillennial dispensationalism, was easily adaptable to Cold War events. In this theory the gathering to heaven of the saved ("rapture") preceded punishment of the wicked in a violent apocalypse ("tribulation"), which ended in the thousand-year reign of Jesus Christ on earth. This theory gave Israel and the Soviet Union, with other nations mentioned in the Bible, prominent roles in the violent destruction of the tribulation. The best-known early interpreter of prophecy for the atomic era was the prolific Wilbur M. Smith of the Fuller Theological Seminary in

Pasadena, California, whose "The Atomic Age and the Word of God" appeared in the January 1946 *Reader's Digest*. Smith's interpretation influenced many fundamentalists, including evangelist Billy Graham.

All fundamentalists were anti-Communists, but the leading crusaders against godless Communism operated in the West, close to a Tulsa-Dallas-Los Angeles axis. The senior crusader, J. Frank Norris, was pastor of Fort Worth's largest Baptist church from 1909 to 1952; founded Fort Worth's Baptist Bible Seminary; founded and edited *The Fundamentalist* periodical; and owned a powerful radio station. An outspoken anti-Communist since 1930, Norris and like-minded fundamentalists linked Communism with modernism (including evolution and integration), social programs, and the ecumenical Federal Council of Churches (FCC, later the National Council of Churches, or NCC), which conservatives frequently labeled "soft on Communism." Norris and other fundamentalists took it very hard when China "fell" to the Communists in 1949, since many Americans had long supported missionaries there and believed Nationalist ruler Chiang Kai-Shek and his wife to be devoted Christians. Norris defended nuclear weapons and an American first-strike policy; he felt that although nuclear war might destroy the world, it would be part of God's plan to bring "a new earth and a new heaven" as predicted in Scripture. When Southern Baptist Convention president Louis Newton made some favorable comments about the Soviet Union after a 1946 visit, Norris played on fundamentalist fears of Communist infiltration by accusing him of Communist sympathies and began an extended, unsuccessful campaign to oust him. Norris actively worked to form a united anti-Communist front with the Catholic Church, for which many of his religious allies roundly criticized him. Much to their dismay, Norris had an audience with Pope Pius XII in Rome and supported the Truman administration's controversial plan to send an ambassador to the Vatican.

The most prominent among Norris's anti-Communist fundamentalist allies were Carl McIntire and Gerald L. K. Smith. A close associate of McCarthy, Calvinist McIntire was founder of the Bible Presbyterian Church, a religious publication and radio empire, and Highland College in Pasadena, California, as well as a seminary and another college in the East.

Norris broke bitterly and publicly with Smith in 1947 when Norris, a supporter of a new state of Israel because of its putative eschatological role, denounced Smith's outspoken anti-Semitism. Smith saw Communism as a Jewish conspiracy. Headquartered in Los Angeles, Smith was one of the main sources of the White-supremacist "Christian Identity" movement. Christian Identity combined anti-Semitism, racism, survivalism, and millennialism into a violent "church" that has since been preparing for an Armageddon of Whites against browns, Blacks, and Jews. The Christian Identity movement claims

that the Whites of Western Europe are the true descendants of the Biblical patriarchs, while Jews are demonic impostors. Christian Identity gradually became the theological center for a number of Ku Klux Klan members, neo-Nazis, skinhead racists, and "Aryan" groups.

An ordained Disciples of Christ minister, Smith had been an assistant in the 1930s to the anti-Semitic "radio priest" Father Coughlin, an associate of Henry Ford and Huey Long, and a member of the American Nazi group, the Silver Shirts. Following World War II, Smith founded the Christian Defense League, a survivalist group, and spread Christian Identity theology in his periodical, *The Cross and the Flag*. One of the newspaper's editors, Dr. Wesley Swift, a Methodist minister from Alabama and former KKK Kleagle, founded the Church of Jesus Christ-Christian, which operates today from Hayden Lake, Idaho. Since Swift's death in 1970, the "Reverend" Richard G. Butler (a mail-order minister) has led the church. Swift was also associated with such racist paramilitary groups as the California Rangers and the Minutemen. Groups associated with the Christian Identity movement have perpetrated numerous violent and deadly "hate-crimes" across the West from North Dakota to California, with the avowed purpose of stopping a Zionist-Communist conspiracy from subverting the United States.

As Norris's health declined after 1950, his star was eclipsed by Billy James Hargis, the most vocal fundamentalist Cold Warrior during the next two decades. Hargis was the anti-Communist protégé of A. B. McReynolds. Influential in the Independent Christian Churches, McReynolds ran an operation throughout the Cold War from his Kiamichi Mountain Mission in Talihina, Oklahoma. He conducted an annual men's clinic in the 1960s which trained thousands of church leaders. During the 1960s and early 1970s, he appeared with Dr. Gerald F. Winrod, who mixed anti-Communism with anti-Semitism, on Dallas oilman H. L. Hunt's "Defender Hour" on border radio.

Rising on the strength of his anti-Communist "crusade" to join the leadership of evangelical fundamentalists, Hargis operated the Christian Crusade from Tulsa, Oklahoma. In the 1950s and 1960s, his organization's literature reached millions of readers. Hundreds of radio stations carried his broadcasts. In the early 1960s, Hargis established the Anti-Communist Youth University in Manitou Springs, Colorado, at the foot of Pike's Peak, which offered two-week classes with a curriculum consisting, in Hargis's words, of "the Bible, the free enterprise system, Constitutional government, how to fight communism, and how to organize anti-Communist youth chapters." Hargis identified the United States (along with Jesus Christ and the Bible) as God's gift to humanity, and the Soviet Union as the Antichrist and the Devil. His most famous anti-Communist stunt was the 1953 Bible Balloon project, in which he and Carl

McIntire launched tens of thousands of balloons from Germany, laden with Bibles and religious tracts, to float across the Iron Curtain. Semi-retired since 1974, Hargis moved his Christian Crusade to Neosho, Missouri, in 1976, where it has fallen into increasing obscurity.

At McIntire's invitation, Frederick Schwarz, another Western anti-Communist crusader, immigrated from Australia in 1953 and established the Christian Anti-Communist Crusade in Waterloo, Iowa. He eventually downplayed association with McIntire and moved his headquarters to Long Beach, California. While neither a true fundamentalist nor a millennialist, Schwarz regarded conservative Christianity as Communism's only alternative. He spread his message through radio programs and presentations given throughout the nation. An appearance before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) in 1957 increased his prominence. Schwarz took his anti-Communist message abroad in the 1970s to countries like El Salvador and the Philippines. He and his Christian Anti-Communism Crusade are still active.

A more secular ally of the fundamentalists, the John Birch Society, founded by North Carolinian Robert Welch in Indianapolis in 1958, found fertile soil in the West. Welch named the society after John Birch, a young Baptist missionary and graduate of Norris's Baptist Bible Seminary whom Chinese Communists allegedly killed during World War II ("the first casualty of World War III"). The society's strongholds were Texas and southern California, particularly in Los Angeles and Houston. In the early 1960s, the mayor of Amarillo, Texas, the school board of Midlothian, Texas, and several congressmen from Southern California were "Birchers." Convinced that Communists were already well on the road to controlling the nation-Welch at times called Eisenhower a "dedicated, conscious agent of the Communist conspiracy" and Reagan its "lackey"-Welch also accused the majority of the nation's clergy of Communist sympathies. Although raised a fundamentalist Baptist, Welch was theologically liberal. His closest clerical friend and supporter was James W. Fifield, Jr., minister of the First Congregational Church of Los Angeles, a theological liberal who always welcomed Welch to his church. Fundamentalists attracted to Welch's politics overlooked his theological peccadilloes. Mormon Apostle and former U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson and his son Reed aided Birch recruitment efforts among Mormons. McIntire and Hargis had close ties to the "Birchers." Welch's influence declined after the 1960s, and he stepped down as John Birch Society president in 1983.

Gerald L. K. Smith's activity in the Los Angeles area, home of one of the nation's largest Jewish communities, worried Jews, who feared a popular association of Judaism with Communism. Their fears grew with the rise of McCarthyism. A high proportion of West Coast Jews had been convinced radicals in the

1930s, and had had influence in a number of mainstream Jewish organizations. At the same time, many of the Communist spy trials in the early 1950s involved Jews, such as Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, Judith Coplon, Robert Soblen, Jack Soble, Morton Sobell, and even Klaus Fuchs, who many falsely assumed was Jewish.

In such an atmosphere, and with the Nazi Holocaust a fresh memory, HUAC's investigations of the Jewish-dominated Hollywood film industry especially alarmed Los Angeles Jews—more especially since John Rankin, who publicly linked Jews and Communism, was a committee member. Six of the Hollywood Ten were Jewish. Fearful that anti-Communism could easily transform into anti-Semitism, Los Angeles Jewish organizations like the Western Division of the American Jewish Committee conducted purges of leftists and affiliated leftist Jewish organizations such as the Jewish People's Fraternal Order, and waved the flag as prominently as they could.

The first major challenge to the relatively unanimous anti-Communism of American churches was the Korean War. The churches did not waver in their opposition to Communism, but they did disagree whether Truman's policy of containment was the best policy. However, most religious groups patriotically closed ranks in support of American troops at war overseas. In 1950 liberal Protestant clergy called for condemnation of the hydrogen bomb, but the NCC was so divided on the issue that it could resolve on no action but prayer. Significant religious divisions over the Cold War would await the Vietnam War.

MORAL CHALLENGE TO THE COLD WAR, 1963-1975

The first large challenge to American Cold War policy was to its most terrifying aspect: nuclear war. The challenge came from an unexpected source, the Catholic Church. The election of John XXIII marked a dramatic change in the Catholic position in international affairs. John's first encyclical, the 1961 *Mater et Magistra*, emphasized social justice rather than international order as the key to peace. In his 1963 *Pacem in Terris* (*Peace on Earth*), John condemned nuclear war, called for international disarmament, and appealed for the development of international bodies to protect the common good. In 1962 the pope convened Vatican II, which in its 1965 *Gaudium et Spes* reaffirmed John's encyclicals and condemned the policy of nuclear deterrence. Continuing John's work for peace, his successor Paul VI expanded on Vatican II and approved conscientious objection in his *Populorum Progressio* of 1967.

During much of the first decade of the Cold War, religious leaders had nearly unanimously supported anti-Communism and discouraged criticism of

the United States as actually or effectively subversive. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference showed that the church could mount an effective moral criticism of domestic policy. Now the Catholic Church had begun the erosion of moral support for American foreign policy. The Vietnam War dramatically accelerated that erosion.

Disillusionment with U.S. foreign policy in Vietnam grew slowly. The religious and political right wing, of course, never wavered in its anti-Communism and support for nuclear weapons and the Vietnam War. Even Catholics only slowly came to oppose the war, in part because many Vietnamese were Catholic. The Catholic hierarchy (and most of the Catholic laity) supported the war as a "just war" until the end of the decade. (A Catholic pacifist movement, inspired by Dorothy Day and Catholic-convert Thomas Merton, and the "Catholic Left," led by the priests Daniel and Philip Berrigan, opposed the war from nearly the beginning, but were active mainly in the East.) In the 1971 Resolution on Southeast Asia the bishops finally condemned the war as unjust, the first time the Catholic church opposed the government on a major foreign policy issue. Yet mainline Protestant churches had already been condemning the war for two or three years.

Religious opposition to Cold War policy does not lend itself to easy summary. It lacked the visible charismatic figures, funding, organization, publication and broadcasting empires, and educational institutions that fundamentalism had. Religious liberals tended to act locally and independently in small organizations or loose regional or national affiliations. Their story is much more diverse and diffuse. The largest, most respected, and most moderate religious anti-war group was the nondenominational Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam (CALCAV), organized in 1965 and 1966. Like the other religious anti-war groups—Fellowship of Reconciliation, Interreligious Committee on Vietnam, American Friends Service Committee, Catholic Peace Fellowship, Pax Christi (Catholic), and Catholic Worker Movement—most of CALCAV's leadership and activity lay in the East. Its only major western leader was Stanford theologian Robert McAfee Brown. Nevertheless, chapters were organized in Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, Palo Alto, San Jose, Los Angeles, Denver, Minneapolis, and even Dallas. Local activity ranged from organizing discussions in churches on the war to civil disobedience. For example, in 1967 Denver CALCAV established a military counseling center; in 1968 clerics from San Francisco CALCAV chained themselves for a two-day service to nine soldiers who went AWOL to protest the war; and in 1971 Minnesota CALCAV organized a 440-mile Peace Walk across the state. In the 1970s, CALCAV changed its name to the gender-neutral Clergy and Laity Concerned (CALL) and shifted its focus to social concerns.