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Sharing the Language of Peace and the Rhetoric of Violence:
William Rainey Harper's Founding Vision for the REA
And the Rhetoric of American Imperialism

Abstract

This research engages the question: In what ways and to what extent was William Rainey Harper's founding vision for the REA shaped by the rhetoric of early 20th century American imperialism and its legitimation of violence against other nations? This paper explores how Harper's originating vision for the REA grew out of his fundamental conviction that the United States, critically informed and democratically inspired by the Bible, could be the world's prophet of democracy. It analyzes how Harper's vision for the REA tacitly, if not explicitly, supported the ideological framework of American imperialism in the early twentieth century and yet, at the same time, offered a broader vision in working toward peace.

Introduction

William Rainey Harper's (1856-1906) founding vision for the Religious Education Association (REA) presents a mixed legacy in the making and unmaking of violence. On the one hand, Harper's vision for the REA supported the development of an organization whose explicit aim and purpose is working toward peace by building structures of ecumenical and interreligious cooperation. On the other hand, that same vision grew out of Harper's wider understanding of America as a biblically inspired, democratic nation whose purpose is to help transform the world as its prophet of democracy. It is a vision that advocated a type of "progressive imperialism" that uncritically assumed that the United States had a destiny to "civilize" the world through its missionary efforts in spreading democracy around the globe¹. For Harper, a biblical scholar by training and an educational visionary by temperament, this vision was expressed as a faith in America as a democratic, "Judeo-Christian" nation that would help bring about what fellow REA founder George Albert Coe called "the democracy of God."²

In this paper, I argue that Harper's founding vision for the REA, rooted in his belief that America was to be "the messianic deliverer of the world" as its prophet of democracy,³ was tacitly shaped by and in turn helped to shape the religiously infused political rhetoric of American imperialism that legitimated violence against other nations. This vision was fostered by the notion of American "providentialism" which perpetuated the myth of American exceptionalism in the early twentieth century.⁴ At the same time, I suggest that Harper's broader educational vision for the REA, though seemingly uncritical in its acceptance of the rhetoric of American providentialism, nevertheless opened spaces for further conversation in the unmaking of violence and working toward the building of peace. Overall, this paper argues that the founding vision of William Rainey Harper for the REA continues to present a mixed legacy and a challenge for religious educators today as they examine their own practice in both the making and unmaking of the rhetoric of violence.

Methodology

This research employs an historical methodology, utilizing both primary and secondary sources. It engages the method of rhetorical criticism in order to examine "the climate of opinion and audience attitudes of the time under

¹ Walter Nugent, *Habits of Empire: A History of American Expansion* (NY: Vintage, 2000), 1.

² Quoted in Helen Allen Archibald, George Albert Coe, "Christian Educators of the 20th Century Project," http://www2.talbot.edu/ce20/view.cfm?n=george_coe.

³ James Wind, *The Bible and the University: The Messianic Vision of William Rainey Harper* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 7.

⁴ Stephen Webb, "American Providence, American Violence," in *From Jeremaid to Jihad: Religion, Violence, and America*, ed. John Carlson and Jonathan Ebel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 91-108.

consideration.”⁵ It seeks to analyze Harper’s originating vision for the REA in the wider context of the currents of American life and thought in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And, it aims at interpreting REA’s founding mission in light of the written and oral discourse found at the confluence of democratic and religious ideals in American imperial rhetoric at the turn of the century.

Harper’s Educational Vision and the Founding of the REA

William Rainey Harper organized the first Convention for Religious Education held in 1903 under the auspices of the Council of Seventy, a group of biblical scholars of the American Institute of Sacred Literature which he had founded as an extension project of the University of Chicago to promote literacy in higher biblical criticism for the wider public.⁶ By the time the first Religious Education Convention was held in Chicago, Harper was already nationally recognized as an educational leader as the first president of the University of Chicago, known for his innovations in higher education and commitment to creating a major research university which attracted many leading scholars in the United States, including John Dewey, Thorsten Veblen, George Herbert Mead, and G. Stanley Hall.⁷

At the same time, Harper was also recognized as a biblical scholar in his own right and was a leading advocate of critical biblical scholarship in the United States.⁸ Born in 1856 in New Concord, Ohio, he enrolled in nearby Muskingum college at the age of ten, graduated as valedictorian at the age of thirteen, completed a Ph.D. in Philology from Yale at the age of nineteen, taught Hebrew at Morgan Park Baptist Seminary in Chicago at twenty-two, and become professor of Semitic languages at Yale by the age of twenty-nine.⁹ Later, when he was appointed President of the University of Chicago at the age of thirty-five, he also served as dean of the Divinity School where he continued to promote critical biblical scholarship.¹⁰ He was considered one of the foremost experts in Biblical Hebrew in the United States, founding what was to become *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* and hailed by *The American Journal of Theology* as doing “more, perhaps, than any man of his generation to promote the study of the Bible among the people.”¹¹ As Martin Marty observes, “Harper wanted to disseminate the critical views from the Sunday school through

⁵ Paul Crawford, “The Farmer and His Role in Society,” in *The Rhetoric of Protest and Reform: 1878-1898*, ed. Paul Boase (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1980), 102-103.

⁶ Helen Allen Archibald, “Originating Vision and Visionaries of the Era,” *Religious Education* 98, no. 4 (Fall 2003), 414.

⁷ Louis Meand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (NY: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2001), 285-319.

⁸ Richard Storr, *Harper’s University: The Beginnings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 57-64.

⁹ See Milton Mayer, *Young Man in a Hurry: The Story of William Rainey Harper* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957)

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ *The American Journal of Theology* 10, no. 2 (April 1906), 201.

graduate school.” He wanted to free the study of the Bible from what he called the “bibliolotry” of narrow sectarianism and authoritarianism by inviting ordinary people to study the Bible in a spirit of free, open, and democratic inquiry.¹²

Thus, to a large extent, for Harper, religious education was synonymous with critical biblical education, reflecting his belief that the Bible expresses universal moral and religious values which have the power to transform society. Moreover, this vision for religious education was rooted in Harper’s overarching educational vision for the United States. He believed that the United States, critically informed and democratically inspired by the Bible, could be the “deliverer of the world,” as its prophet of democracy.¹³ Such a vision reflects the quintessential early twentieth century progressive spirit, with its abiding faith in American democracy and in the power of education to change the world. It is a spirit which Harper fundamentally possessed and which animated his overarching vision. Hence, at its core, Harper’s founding vision for the REA was an educational one, infused with a profound sense of America’s religious mission to do nothing less than transform the world through democracy.

For Harper, the vanguard of this socially transformative educational vision was the university with its scientific, universal, and cooperative spirit, making it “the prophet, priest, and sage of democracy.”¹⁴ He argued: “Democracy has been given a mission to the world...that the university is the prophet of this democracy, as well as its priest and philosopher; that in other words, the university is the messiah of democracy, its to-be-expected deliverer.”¹⁵ Such unabashed claims reflect Harper’s fundamental belief in the transformative power of education and his optimistic faith in American democracy to usher in a universal spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood. In this, Harper reflects the optimism found in early twentieth century Protestant liberal theology which sought to transform society itself.

As Sydney Ahlstrom observes, the term “liberal” used to describe this theology “denotes both a certain generosity or charitableness toward divergent opinions and a desire for intellectual liberty.”¹⁶ For proponents of liberal theology like Harper, the liberal spirit was synonymous with the democratic spirit in pursuit of true intellectual liberty. Harper believed that these democratic ideals were themselves derived from the Bible and that the true spirit of democracy depended on freedom in search of God’s truth.¹⁷ As George Marsden points out, for Harper “modern education at all levels, particularly when integrated with the

¹² Martin Marty, *The Irony of it All: 1893-1919*, Vol. 1, *Modern American Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 40.

¹³ Wind, 7.

¹⁴ Quoted in Storr, 13.

¹⁵ William Rainey Harper, “The University and Democracy,” in *Trends in Higher Education* 12 (1905).

¹⁶ Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 779.

¹⁷ George Marsden, *The Soul of the American University* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1994), 242.

teaching of modern scientific higher critical principles of biblical study, was the best path to truly Christian and democratic ideals.”¹⁸ Therefore, Harper maintained that “in this work of educating humanity to understand God and itself, America is the training school for teachers,” as the world’s beacon of democracy.

Here, Harper’s grand educational vision also found resonance with the progressive educational views of John Dewey whose laboratory school Harper helped to establish at the University of Chicago. As George Marsden notes “Dewey proved himself a kindred spirit to Harper” insofar as “Dewey and Harper both believed in the redemptive function of education” in “teaching the values of American democracy.”¹⁹ Likewise, George Albert Coe of Chicago’s Northwestern University gave similar expression to the transformative power of religious education in bringing about what he called “the democracy of God.” For Coe, as the United States “progressed” in the democratic ideal, “the Christian life could be an incarnation, a realization of divine purpose, presence, and communion.”²⁰ As Helen Allen Archibald underscores, Coe represented “the ebullient confidence” of early twentieth century American Protestant liberal theology “that the conscience of modernity was being sensitized to higher values in an ongoing historical process,” a process in which the United States was perceived as playing a key transformative role in the world.²¹

Harper shared Coe’s “ebullient confidence” in the religiously inspired liberal ideals of American democracy and his optimistic belief in the power of education to liberally spread those ideals. Together, these ideas crystallized in Chicago in 1903 at the first Convention on Religious Education. Initially concerned with the narrowly evangelical tenor of the Sunday school and the resistance of the International Sunday School Association to implement reforms based on critical biblical scholarship, Harper and the Council of Seventy proposed a convention of religious educators that would “promote a more responsible approach to the Bible and a more progressive approach to education in religion.”²² Hence, Harper envisioned an organization which would facilitate putting “critical study of the Bible... within reach of every person,” thereby promoting a truly democratic spirit of free and open inquiry.²³

Moreover, as Stephen Schmidt points out, Harper envisioned universities leading the way in this reform of religious education as part of their overall mission to reform education in general. Harper believed universities would fulfill their role in “reforming the nation and the world in light of a religious

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 251.

²⁰ Marty, 265.

²¹ Archibald, “George Albert Coe.”

²² Allen Moore, “One Hundred Years of the Religious Education Association,” *Religious Education* 98, no. 4 (Fall 2003), 428.

²³ Ibid.

understanding of democracy.”²⁴ Thus, Harper and the other founders of the REA imagined an organization that would “inspire the religious forces of our country with the educational ideal” and “the educational forces of our country with the religious ideal,” thereby serving as a catalyst for a truly democratic social and cultural transformation of the world.²⁵

Yet, as Mary Boys emphasizes, underneath this overarching vision for religious education, there lies a “hidden curriculum” of an uncritical faith in American democracy.²⁶ In extolling the values of freedom and a democratic spirit, Harper not only uncritically assumed that the United States is the ultimate exemplar of those values, but also he unabashedly accepted the idea of American providentialism in proposing that America would serve as the prophet, priest, and messiah of democracy for the rest of the world.

Religion and American Providentialism

The trope of providentialism has a long history in the American rhetorical lexicon. Gabriel Moran points out that from its earliest usage the word “America” had “mythical and religious” connotations as “a new promised land where the world could begin again.”²⁷ In his sermon to the puritan settlers of Massachusetts Bay, John Winthrop evoked the biblical image of “a city set on a hill,” to remind the settlers of their providential destiny in a new land. And, the great seal of the United States contains the words *Annuit Coeptis*, “Providence favors our undertaking.” Stephen Webb argues that this “doctrine of Providence” provides a key conceptual framework in shaping American identity around the idea of what Americans “hope and believe their country is destined to be.”²⁸ Thus, both Moran and Webb argue that “America” is not so much a place as an idea, an idea with deeply religious connotations.²⁹

Moreover, Webb points out that this idea of American providentialism was inextricably intertwined with the notion that “God created in America a land bound only by freedom and opportunity.” Hence, American providentialism was historically tied to the American frontier, which represented unlimited opportunity and a democratic spirit of freedom, a “meeting point between savagery and civilization,” where America was perceived as having a “manifest destiny” to tame, civilize, and Christianize an untamed wilderness.³⁰ Webb argues that this

²⁴ Stephen Schmidt, *A History of the Religious Education Association* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1983), 26-27.

²⁵ “The Purpose of the Association,” *Religious Education* 1 (April 1906), 2.

²⁶ Mary Boys, *Educating in Faith: Maps and Visions* (Lima, OH: Academic Renewal Press, 1989), 59.

²⁷ Gabriel Moran, “Religious Education Toward America,” *Religious Education* 72, no. 5 (1977), 475.

²⁸ Webb, 91.

²⁹ See Webb, 91 and Moran, 474.

³⁰ Webb, 92-93.

idea served as a religiously infused rhetorical justification for American expansionism throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an idea which legitimated violence not only against Native Americans but against other nations as well.³¹

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Frederick Jackson Turner suggested that America was entering a new phase of its history with the closing of the Western frontier. He prophetically observed that “American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise.”³² As Ivan Musicant points out, Turner’s thesis foreshadowed American imperial expansion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which included the acquisition of Hawaii, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and control of the Isthmus of Panama.³³ Yet, as Matthew McCullough suggests, this new imperial phase of American expansionism was supported by a renewed sense of American providentialism as America saw its role on the world stage as a democratic, “Christian nation” which had a “redemptive role in the world” to uplift and “civilize” people who were “broken and downtrodden.”³⁴

Here, America’s providential rhetoric took on new meaning as “Uncle Sam became the Good Samaritan,” claiming intervention in the affairs of other nations for “purely humanitarian motives.”³⁵ Such was the justification for the Spanish American War in 1898, and American intervention in the Philippines in 1899, which President McKinley justified by saying “We could not leave them to themselves—they were unfit for self-government . . . there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all and educate the Filipinos and uplift and Christianize them.”³⁶ Aside from the fact that most Filipinos were already Catholic Christians, the use of such rhetoric underscores the extension of the idea of American providentialism to the world stage and the legitimation of American imperial violence that it offered.

Harper’s Educational Vision and the Rhetoric of American Imperialism

In many ways, Harper’s vision for education in general, and religious education, in particular reflected the rhetoric of the new imperial phase of American providentialism found in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Such rhetoric can be found in Harper’s claims that “education will be

³¹ Webb, 92.

³² Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” in *A Documentary History of the United States*, 7th edition, ed. Richard Heffner (NY: Signet, 2002), 221-222.

³³ Ivan Musicant, *Empire by Default: The Spanish-American War and the Dawn of the American Century* (NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1998), 658.

³⁴ Matthew McCullough, “Biblical Metaphors for Interventionism in the Spanish American War,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Religion and Violence*, ed. Andrew Murphy (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 413.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 410-412.

³⁶ Quoted in Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States*, First Perennial Classic Edition (NY: Harper, 2003), 313.

the watchword of the new Christianity,” that “it is a call to establish here at home the foundations for the evangelization of the world; for if the world is to be evangelized America must do it.” Hence, Harper believed that the United States, transformed through democratic ideals, would become a beacon of “the teaching of Jesus Christ, the world’s greatest advocate of democracy.”³⁷

As McCullough points out, it was such providential rhetoric in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that was used to legitimate American imperial violence as “a providential necessity.”³⁸ During the Spanish-American war, for example, there was wide consensus among Protestant churches on the rightness of the American cause against Spain and “even among pacifist groups there was little vocal opposition.”³⁹ While Harper made no public statements concerning the war itself, throughout this period he continued to espouse publically and vociferously the doctrine of American providentialism and support America’s role as the world’s anointed champion of democracy. Thus, he tacitly, if not explicitly supported the consensus of the religious establishment that it is America’s Christian duty “to civilize” our “neighbor.”⁴⁰

Moreover, in *The Biblical World*, published under the auspices of the University of Chicago, Harper endorsed a series of articles on “The Field of Religious Education in America.” These articles supported the idea that religious education in America must stand for the cause of “truth and righteousness” against “the enemies of the republic” and democratic freedom.⁴¹ Likewise, they maintained that “the religious history of our country” and “the duties of patriotism” must be understood” as part of “the long and glorious fight for purity, liberty, and the enlightenment of the world.”⁴² Against the backdrop of American imperial expansion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such rhetoric resonates with Sydney Ahlstrom’s observation that “never have patriotism, imperialism, and the religion of American Protestants stood in such fervent coalescence as during the McKinley-Roosevelt era.”⁴³

Harper’s use of the rhetoric of providentialism and his belief in the role of America as the world’s prophet of democracy echoes the sentiments of his era. The year Frederick Jackson Turner presented his thesis on the closing of the American frontier at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, foreshadowing American imperial expansion, Harper was finishing his first full year as president of the University of Chicago, which had opened its doors a year

³⁷ William Rainey Harper, “America as a Missionary Field,” in *Religion and the Higher Life: Talks to Students* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1904), 175-184.

³⁸ McCullough, 412.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 406-407

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 409.

⁴¹ Clyde Weber Votaw, “The Field of Religious Education in America,” *The Biblical World* 25, no. 5 (May 1905), 356-360.

⁴² W.G. Ballantine, “The Material of Religious Education,” *The Biblical World* 27, no. 2 (February 1906), 116.

⁴³ Ahlstrom, 880.

earlier.⁴⁴ Harper conceived of Chicago as a thoroughly modern and American University, a true prophet of democracy that would be a shining beacon for the rest of the world.⁴⁵ Such optimism reflects the progressive optimism of the age as symbolized by the Exposition itself, known as the “White City” as it lighted the way toward the future progress of America in the new century.⁴⁶

Conclusion

To a large extent, Harper’s uncritical advocacy of the rhetoric of American providentialism, and his tacit support of American imperial violence, reflects the fact that, in many ways, Harper was simply a man of his times. He believed education was the path to unlocking freedom of conscience; yet, he believed that America held the key. He dreamed of peace, yet uncritically supported the rhetoric of war. And, he broadened the scope of religious education, yet narrowly clung to the idea that American liberal Protestant Christianity was the world’s teacher. Thus, it is apropos that Marin Marty describes this period in American religious history as “ironic.” Quoting Reinhold Niebuhr, Marty emphasizes “that a situation is ironic if ‘virtue becomes vice through some hidden defect in the virtue’ or ‘if wisdom becomes folly because it does not know its limits.’”⁴⁷ Yet, Marty cautions, in spite of vice, “one must not overlook the virtue” and in spite of folly, one must recognize “there is also wisdom.”⁴⁸ While William Rainey Harper’s folly may have been his uncritical acceptance of the rhetoric of American providentialism and its supporting role in the making of American imperial violence, there is wisdom found in Harper’s founding vision for the REA which recognized that by building structures of cooperation, religious education has the potential, at least, to become a pathway in working toward peace.

⁴⁴ See Mayer, 16-17.

⁴⁵ Julie Ruben, *The Making of the Modern University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 98-115.

⁴⁶ Jaques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence: 1500 to the Present-500 Years of Western Cultural Life* (NY: Harper Collins, 2000), 600.

⁴⁷ Marty, 7.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

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