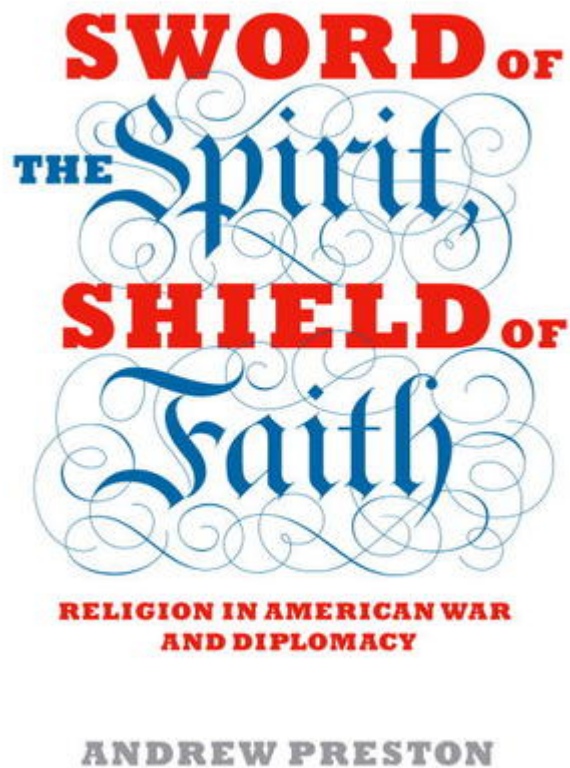


# {essays in history}

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## Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy



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## Reviewed Work(s)

*Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy.* By Andrew Preston (New York: Knopf, 2012). Pp. 832. Hardcover, \$37.50.

Late one October evening in 1898, President William McKinley paced the halls of the White House, tormented over what to do about the Philippines in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War. Should the United States assume control of the country—instead of Spain or any other European power—and thereby step boldly onto the world stage as a colonial power? Suddenly, clarity came from on high. “I went down on my knees and prayed Almighty God for light and guidance,” McKinley remembered. And guidance came. The only suitable choice, McKinley concluded, was for the United States not to secede control of the Philippines to some European power or to support Filipino self-government, but “to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them, and by God’s grace do the very best we could by them, as our fellow-men for whom Christ also died.” McKinley slept soundly that evening, assured that if America was to become a colonial power it would at least stand not for brute force or material gain, but for the spread of Christianity and civilization.

This is a familiar episode in American history, and Andrew Preston’s take on it in *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith* captures the spirit of his thoughtful, six-hundred-plus page treatment of the tangled and consequential history of religion and war in American life. Most historians dismiss McKinley’s recollection as a superficial, frivolous, or even hypocritically sacred justification of a decision he had already made. Preston—after reminding us that McKinley, reared an evangelical Methodist in Ohio, was among America’s most devout Presidents—suggests instead that historians ought to take McKinley’s religious worldview seriously in understanding his motivations, noting that “his decision to seek guidance and solace through prayer was perfectly consistent with his religious faith and political ideology ... It would have been odd, and totally uncharacteristic of the man, had McKinley *not* prayed to God for guidance” (157).

What Preston is after, in short, is a better understanding of how religion influenced American war and foreign relations, a topic strangely neglected by historians of American religion, war, and diplomacy alike. Religious rhetoric like McKinley's, to Preston, is more than shallow talk; it is reflective of fundamental, sincerely held ideas about America's identity and proper role in the world. Preston's ambitious narrative runs from King Philip's War to the War on Terror; its main premise is that there was "not one religious influence upon American foreign relations, but many: nationalists but also internationalists, exceptionalist but also cosmopolitan, nativist but also tolerant, militant but also pacifist" (4).

*Sword of the Spirit*, Preston confesses, is a book conceived amid the Bush-era War on Terror, a moment that witnessed the revival of a familiar rhetoric of America's moral goodness and divine mission in the world. Thankfully, despite the present pertinence of his subject and the passions it arouses, Preston expressly avoids any hint of moral judgment. His goal is to understand and not to condemn, and he certainly is not out to prove once and for all that religion is either a "productive or pernicious force" in American life. Preston's fair-minded tone and his admirable empathy for his subjects come as a refreshing breath of fresh air.

Preston's greatest challenge—an immense one, no doubt, and one he mostly overcomes—was to offer some sort of coherent narrative: if religion was such a many-sided and even contradictory influence, can anything of analytical value ultimately be said about it in a sweeping survey? Must we settle only for a story of loosely held together episodes without either a coherent story line or a narrative arc complete with a clear beginning and end?

In many respects, what Preston faces is in fact a classic question of change versus continuity. Are there enduring patterns, ideas, themes undergirding how Americans across the centuries have drawn upon religious beliefs to guide their actions in war and diplomacy? Or is there a vast gulf separating Puritan New England and the modern Religious Right? After all the necessary qualifications about the past being a foreign country, Preston settles decidedly on the continuity end of the spectrum. He clues us in to four "broad themes" that "persisted and interacted throughout most of American history" and thus also provide coherence to his narrative. They are: *Morality* (religion as the inspiration of the

“conscience” of American foreign relations); *Liberty* (a strong libertarian ethos arising from the synthesis of republicanism and Protestantism, expressed most commonly as isolationism, unilateralism, or a distrust of international organizations like the United Nations); *Progress* (a confidence that the general improvement of a society was possible if it followed an American model of religious and political liberty, wellsprings of material prosperity); *Nationalism* (American exceptionalism, in short, has always been rooted chiefly in a mostly Protestant civil religion).

These themes might appear banal at first, but they do not appear so when Preston goes about the task of uncovering them from the unique lives and ideas of particular people acting in particular eras. The heart of the book is a wide-ranging, dazzling achievement that cannot be easily summarized. It deftly weaves together the stories of elite policymakers; military, political, and religious leaders; ordinary civilians (especially missionaries); and several key non-governmental organizations and religious institutions.

Preston dutifully recites a conventional set of arguments in the chapters leading up to the Civil War era: the colonial era witnessed a synthesis of Protestant and American exceptionalism; evangelical religion exerted an undeniable (if imprecise) influence on the spirit of the American Revolution; key events in the early republic, from conflicts with Barbary pirates to the French Revolution to the War of 1812, solidified the cultural hold of America’s reigning Christian republicanism. Given his eye for the complexities and contradictions of religious influences, when Preston comes around to the antebellum era, he reminds us that the same religious culture that fostered the expansionism of manifest destiny also fostered a desire to apply the principles of “Christian love” to foreign and domestic policy by way of pacifism and humanitarian intervention. The irony, though, is that these contradictory religious impulses reinforced a fundamentally similar idea: America, as a beacon of political and religious truth, might well be the savior of the world, the world’s last best hope.

It was the Civil War, in Preston’s retelling, that solidified this messianic complex rooted in a confidence in “universal redemption” through an “interventionists, activist, global foreign policy” (163). Lincoln stands in for America in Preston’s Civil War chapters; we hear very little from

Confederates in particular, who surely dissented in droves from this sunny confidence in the Union's glory and its mission in the world. Preston might rightfully reply that it was the "ideology for American globalism"—built upon a belief in humanitarian intervention and a sense of divine mission—that won the day after the Civil War, and gave rise to a generation of late-nineteenth-century Americans imbued with a worldview like William McKinley's.

Some of Preston's most fascinating and empathetic sections deal with American missionaries, but without any hint of condescension or condemnation. The late nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century explosion of missionary efforts are essential to Preston's story, because these missionaries embodied more fully than any other Americans the synthesis of humanitarianism and sense of divinely inspired mission that defined the post-Civil War "ideology for American globalism." Moreover, missionaries were the vanguard of an essential development of American society at the time: they were "fiercely nationalist Americans becoming internationalists" (176). Missionaries brought America to the world, and the world to America; if they were "advance agents of American imperialism," theirs was an "informal imperialism" premised on spreading the American way of life around the world, but not establishing formal political or military dominance. If we want to understand America's role in the world in the twentieth century, we would do well to understand the actions and legacies of American missionaries.

In many respects, when Preston arrives at the twentieth century, he presents us with the culmination of the Civil War era inheritance of humanitarianism and international activism emboldened by a sense of divine calling. Of course, Preston keeps an eye on religion's wide-ranging influence, so we learn of debates between pacifists and war hawks during the run up to the First World War, and later debates between Reinhold Niebuhr-types and Christian pacifists. Preston includes particularly insightful chapters on the "simple faith" of Franklin Roosevelt (essential in enshrining religious pluralism at the heart of the American creed) and the public career and private faith of John Foster Dulles, especially his work with the Federal Council of Church's Commission on a Just and Durable Peace. Preston's cast of characters held a wide variety of opinions about when and to what extent America should use military

force, yet they also all seem to have accepted the basic idea that America had a humanitarian mission, given by God, that would be fulfilled only through active engagement with the world. What constituted this humanitarian mission – and how best it could be fulfilled—remained fiercely debated questions, but underlying these disagreements there seems to have been a remarkably widespread religious consensus that America had a critical role to play on the global stage and in human history.

Perhaps Americans came to embrace a decidedly more internationalist, activist vision of its place in the world, and perhaps the reigning civil religion eventually made room for Catholicism and Judaism, not just Protestantism. But, by and large, Preston's narrative is not a story of significant change over time; what we have instead are variations on common themes, each generation of Americans rearticulating a fundamental set of ideas handed down to them about their place in the world and in human history.

*Sword of the Spirit* is by all measures a tome, but it is an engaging and brisk read. Preston has a good eye for the telling and captivating anecdote, which serves him well in covering a lot of ground in short order. His footnotes and bibliography confirm that he has digested an impressive amount of the existing literature on American religion, war, and diplomacy, and it shows: he proves equally adept at covering antebellum westward expansion or the Treaty of Versailles as he is at recounting the finer points of New Haven theology or Christian realism.

Ultimately, *Sword of the Spirit* is more an invitation to further research than it is the final word on the topic of religion in American war and diplomacy. For starters, more attention could be paid to religion and *war*, not simply foreign affairs, which is the bulk of Preston's concern. Some of the more captivating stories in Preston's account are of Americans reconciling—or failing to reconcile—their religious beliefs with their ideas about whether or not (and how) their nation should wage war. The Civil War era contains stories such as these in abundance; as Preston reminds us, the fiercest abolitionists in the antebellum era were also often the nation's fiercest pacifists, a position that left them with a profound moral dilemma: should they support a war that might end slavery? Stories like these at the intersection of American religion and war, if explored at greater length, would likely reveal much not only

about religious influences on war, but also about how war has reshaped Americans' ideas about religion and national identity.

In the end, Preston's goals are both grand and modest: he seeks to demonstrate that there has been a persistent religious influence on American war and foreign relations, and thereby rectify a glaring omission in American historiography. Yet, in doing so, Preston claims not to offer "a unified theory or single-cause explanation of U.S. foreign policy," but, instead, only to have shed light on "a missing link, a vital but unrecognized, even undiscovered, part of the story." This modesty, this recognition that religious belief is no more than one of many influences on American war making and diplomacy, goes a long way toward offering, in Preston's words, "a fuller, more complete understanding of the role America has played in the world."

Yet, if Preston has demonstrated that this religious influence existed, it remains for future historians to explain how decisive this religious influence ultimately was in any given moment—that is, how decisive it was in relation to other equally profound influences that shaped American attitudes toward war and diplomacy. Preston did not set out exactly to answer this question; it would have been infeasible of course, for it would have meant, in effect, rewriting the whole of the history of American war and diplomacy. But the most important question—how much explanatory power can be afforded to religion alone? – begs a more thorough answer. Preston's highly successful narrative, in short, demands a scholarly response from other historians interested in religion, war, and diplomacy—historians who must dive deeply into particular episodes like the ones Preston covers, and offer a more nuanced account of where exactly the religious influence on American war and foreign affairs fits within the wider tapestry of complex and multi-varied influences that define how America acts in the world.

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