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The Environmental Theology of Aimee Semple McPherson

Brian K. Pipkin

My initial investigation into Aimee Semple McPherson—founder of The International Church of the Foursquare Gospel—and ecology was bleak: every word search returned a spiritual metaphor. “Garbage” came back as “garbage can of Satan,” “pollution” came back as “pollution of the soul,” “plants” came back as “plants of faith,” and “dumping” came back as “dumping ground for gossip.” But eventually, persistence paid off.

Popular pastor and author Rick McKinley writes, “Margins are those clear spaces along the edge of a page that keep the words from spilling off. Every book has them. You might jot notes in the margins, but for the most part they go unnoticed. They don’t represent the book, and they don’t define its message. They’re simply there.”¹⁵⁹ McKinley’s analogy describes McPherson’s engagement with nature. McPherson made comments, not commentaries, about nature. She had strong opinions—some radical by today’s standards—yet most remained underdeveloped. Moreover, her theology was largely anthropocentric. People, not the environment, occupied the center of her doctrine.¹⁶⁰ While nature, theologically, occupied the margins for McPherson, politically, it took center stage, especially during her anti-war expositions. Thus, environmental concern ultimately found expression in her patriotism.

McPherson spent little time theologizing about nature’s relationship to humans. She believed in a good creation, and there remain some comments alluding to nature, but nothing expanding on Scriptures used by contemporary green theologians. This is not to say she was apathetic, but living between two World Wars, she had more immediate impending issues to consider. The earth, she believed, was on the verge of self-extinction, not through environmental degradation, but through weapons of mass destruction. She believed war and ecological destruction were one package. Thus, her opposition to war was also her opposition to ecological destruction. The war-earth-destruction combo is summed up in her commentary on needlessly destructive scorched earth tactics in war. Within, she introduced a cast of characters and systems responsible for the scorched earth—greedy politicians, war manufacturers, demons, armament, and over-funded military budgets. The consequences of scorched earth as foretold in the Bible provided her the context to criticize politics, unjust laws, institutions, and the people who perpetuate the destruction of earth.

THE WORLD AFLAME

McPherson believed in the dual-use of nature. She believed nature pointed to God’s provision as well as God’s judgment. God blessed humanity with a “heating and lighting system overhead,” a “sprinkling system,” and a “cooling system.” God gave us “beautiful granaries of fields of wheat and orchards of fruit. He has given us the coal and oil, the emeralds of diamonds, the precious treasures that have never been fully discovered.”¹⁶¹ Yet, God also used the elements, namely floods and fires, to purge the world. In her message, “The World Aflame,” she referenced her favorite end-time narrative, the Noah doctrine, and reminded listeners that God would not destroy humanity again through flood—instead, God will use fire. The earth, she argued, was being scorched by none other than humanity itself through the institution of war. She blamed munitions factories, arsenals, and the death-dealing instruments of war.¹⁶²

The risk weapons posed to the earth and its inhabitants were a problem for McPherson. Drawing on Joel, she connects tanks (war) to the devouring and destruction of land, animals, and vegetation. McPherson quotes Joel 2:1: “How do the beasts groan, the herds of cattle are perplexed because they have no pasture: yea, the flocks of sheep are made desolate.” She believed war was responsible for destroying Earth—pastures, trees, rivers, vegetation, and cattle.¹⁶³ Because of poisonous bombs “nothing shall ever grow again where they fall, for the poisonous gases will destroy all vegetation.”¹⁶⁴ Not only were toxins bad for the environment, they were bad for people. She described how people’s “lungs were tortured with every breath” from poisonous gases that covered battlefields like a blanket of death.¹⁶⁵

McPherson believed the U.S. was guilty of fueling this fire. She was far from blind to the imperfections of America. Though she embraced the God-and-country Christianity of her generation, it did not prevent her from questioning the notion

of a “Christian American.” She once asked, “Why should God bless America when America curses God?” Additionally, she linked America’s turning away from God with a laundry list of sins including cross-dressing and war-making. The prospect of America calling itself a “Christian nation” while it manufactures explosives, poisonous gases, and stockpiles long range guns, disturbed McPherson.¹⁶⁶ She appealed to other nations to stop rolling out “barrels” of hunger, poison, hate, and munitions.¹⁶⁷

SELF-EXTERMINATION

As mentioned, McPherson affirmed the goodness of God’s creation. God created a “perfect world” with “perfect people” and placed them in a “perfect spot.” The fall, she believed, introduced a host of problems like revenge, disease, and patriarchy in the world.¹⁶⁸ Moreover, she interpreted the “groans of creation” (Rom 8:22) as earth waiting to be delivered from wars, bloodshed, and earthquakes.¹⁶⁹ McPherson’s greatest concern, however, was one that threatened human existence—war. New weapons technologies created a moral challenge for clergy following World War I. Poisonous bombs, in particular, contributed to the pacifist sentiment of the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁷⁰ McPherson echoed these moral concerns by consistently rejecting the invention and use of poisonous bombs.¹⁷¹ She believed these new poisonous gases would make World War I look like a child’s play toy.¹⁷² She also protested new war inventions, namely the technological sophistication of airplanes. Nations were deploying their “messengers of death” (airplanes) to destroy people, land, and cities.¹⁷³

McPherson believed humanity was on the verge of self-extermination, not through environmental deterioration, but by weapons of mass destruction. Her self-extermination discourse sounded a lot like biologist Ernst Mayr who believed human intelligence was a lethal mutation. Mayr argued the more you move up the scale of intelligent life, survival begins to steadily decline. Life at the bottom of the biological pyramid, like bacteria and beetles, have a greater survival rate than mammals and humans.¹⁷⁴ In other words, humans possess the intelligence and technology to exterminate themselves. Similarly, McPherson suggested that instead of using the “engineering skill of the world” for peaceful purposes, minds were being devoted to “devise more deadly arms, gases, and aerial bombs” to destroy life.¹⁷⁵ She described the intellectuals of her day as “giants of thought” who, filled with violence, were responsible for the “mechanical and demon-inspired inventions for [the] destruction of humanity.”¹⁷⁶ Thus, McPherson’s view is succinctly expressed by President Kennedy who warned, “If mankind does not put an end to war, war will put an end to mankind.”¹⁷⁷

NATURAL DISASTERS

Following natural disaster, the inevitable question arises: Who is responsible? McPherson had many explanations, but unlike her contemporaries, she did not exploit tragedy for evangelistic gain. She was not in the guilt-producing business. McPherson believed in hell, but not for advertising purposes.¹⁷⁸ Although McPherson’s sermons were incredibly emotional, she scorned preachers who exploited the range of human emotion for the wrong reasons. She verbalized her opposition to the hell-fire and brimstone techniques of old-style evangelicalism, and labeled the tactics used by these theater-evangelists as “pulpit-pounding”—the use of “fear, abuse, touching stories, a tear in the voice, and visions of hell” in order to “coerce people into making a decision” to follow Jesus.¹⁷⁹ Moreover, it was uncharacteristic of her to blame victims of natural disasters; instead she generally attributed natural disasters to the preordaining of events, prophecy, or fate—not individual lifestyles. With that said, I have no doubt she would agree people play a key role in perpetuating natural disasters (e.g., the Dust Bowl). Her xenophobia did, occasionally, lead to name-calling.¹⁸⁰ However, she tried to distinguish between opposing evil from the people committing it. Her enemy was poverty. “You can blame it on whatever you want, but it is here.” She described her enemy in suprapersonal terms like squalor, hunger, and crime.¹⁸¹

When disaster struck, rather than playing the blame-game, McPherson chose practical Christianity as evidenced in her disaster response such as the 1925 Santa Barbara earthquake, the 1938 Los Angeles flood, and the 1930s Dust Bowl. She used these tragedies constructively as talking points to (1) remind her people of the temporal nature of life, (2) to give to the poor, and (3) to call the nation back to God. She sermonized her gospel-in-overalls ethic in a message titled, “Practical Christianity” where she argued for a “whole gospel” that was “practical for the poor.”¹⁸² Historian Edith Blumhofer notes that McPherson’s practical response to crisis reflects her desire to help the needy.¹⁸³ McPherson also applauded the Public Works Administration for assisting “a million ruined farmers” and “starved cattle” caused by drought. The Dust Bowl, which caused

major ecological, agricultural, and economic havoc for farmers, concerned McPherson. She voiced interest over the soil quality of the corn belt as “plows turn over only ashes instead of moisture.”¹⁸⁴

WHODUNIT?

So “whodunit?” Who is responsible for natural disasters? McPherson believed Satan was the primary cause of ecological destruction. Satan, she argued, was the “arch-conspirator venting his wrath on the world by creating havoc among the powers and the laws of nature.” Satan was plummeting earth towards ecological Armageddon through “tribulation, sorrow, pestilence, and famine.”¹⁸⁵ Satan was also responsible for war, the “hidden hand” pulling the “political and economic strings” of nations in an attempt to “defeat their plans for peace.”¹⁸⁶ Satan, she argued, occupied every war council while “war-mad demons” were “perched on the shoulders of every military commander riding in the cockpit of every bombing plane.”¹⁸⁷

Although she blamed Satan for ecological destruction and war, she was not an archetype of the demon-behind-the-bush brand of Pentecostalism.¹⁸⁸ The Achilles heel of Pentecostal political theology—the personalization of evil—was common for her Pentecostal contemporaries, but nevertheless rejected by McPherson. She challenged systemic sin, though she was careful to frame political criticism in theological terms.¹⁸⁹

LIFEBOATS

Influenced by D.L. Moody, McPherson commonly used lifeboats, a sectarian symbol of escapism, to symbolize her ministry. Although she did not fully embrace Pentecostal sectarianism, she routinely swayed between critical pessimism and hopeful activism. Understandably, given her context, McPherson’s depression-era editorials communicated a defeatist perspective, embracing a kind of ecological predeterminism. “No need to pray for better times as they are not in the cards.” Abandoning wishful thinking, she advised readers to “accept the inevitable and get ready for the coming of Jesus.”¹⁹⁰ What can we do for this sinful world? “Nothing so far as changing it is concerned. She is like an old sinking ship. There’s no use to put upon her any patches of reformation or improvement movements; for she is doomed to go down, patches and all.”¹⁹¹ Destruction was imminent. Jesus was coming. Souls needed to be saved. Her eschatology is sprinkled with doomsday fatalism, interpreting end-times Calvinistically—a fate in which humanity cannot change world events. Consequently, this lifeboat portrait has mistakenly led historians to overlook McPherson’s political activism.¹⁹²

However, we should not judge her lifeboat ethics too harshly or anachronistically. First, pessimism and optimism coexisted for McPherson. Her defeatist everything-is-hopeless-I-quit sayings were published simultaneously with columns encouraging readers towards contributing to here-and-now social reforms. For example, the *Foursquare Crusader* praised the church’s activist role in diplomacy between nations, sanitation and health, better wages and living conditions, and peace over militarism.¹⁹³ Second, lifeboat ethics was only a small part of her larger here-and-now social justice ministry. While McPherson shared the Assembly of God’s doomsday eschatology, she also embraced a “this worldly” focus.¹⁹⁴ Third, McPherson believed in Augustine’s total depravity doctrine. Everything was fallen, declining, and decaying. However, her doctrine of depravity did not lead to inaction. As Matthew Sutton notes, McPherson interpreted the Bible as a directive to engage the nation’s political systems and institutions to create a more Christian nation.¹⁹⁵ Her life provides a critique of the partisan direction in which subsequent Pentecostal movements traveled.¹⁹⁶ Finally, while lifeboat doctrine may have fueled pessimism, it also fueled her protest. She questioned the notion of human progress, lamented violence, and denounced the worldliness of American culture.¹⁹⁷ While ecological destruction and the foreordaining of events was inevitable in McPherson’s theology, it did not result in passivity or inaction. Her depression-era editorials were indeed despairing, but pessimism did not trump her political engagement.

CONSERVATION

In the 1930s, McPherson, a Democrat, supported Franklin D. Roosevelt’s liberal New Deal reforms which included regulatory reforms protecting natural resources.¹⁹⁸ She believed in environmental patriotism—the belief that a country’s greatness is defined by its environment.¹⁹⁹ For example, she equated the greatness of America with its abundance of resources such as

fruitful fields, forests, powerful rivers, water systems, mines, and quarries of gold and silver.²⁰⁰ She also said California was Uncle Sam's favorite child as it offered the best in resources.²⁰¹ McPherson, I believe, scratched the surface of what historian Ronald Wright argues in *A Short History of Progress*. Wright believes a culture is no better than its woods. In other words, the health of land and water and woods can only be the lasting basis for any civilization's survival and success. "If civilization is to survive, it must live on the interest, not on the capital, of nature."²⁰²

McPherson observed state conservation laws. For example, her Temple Welfare Department re-routed commissary items to conserve rubber and gas.²⁰³ She also exchanged her vehicle for a buggy to conserve gasoline.²⁰⁴ McPherson was no Mark Driscoll, who, when defending his choice of gas-guzzling cars, argued that the one who made the environment is coming back to destroy it.²⁰⁵ Although McPherson had moments of despair, she did not advocate a theology that views the world as disposable (i.e. "Throwaway Theology").

McPherson supported both peacetime and wartime environmental regulations. Although it is difficult to be certain, her support for conservation was possibly inspired by patriotism more than theology given most of her references to conservation took place during World War II. In other words, while theology inspired her to reflect on God's good creation, patriotism inspired her action to conserve.²⁰⁶ Moreover, war also provided her the occasion to prove her patriotism to U.S. officials. By World War II, Foursquare leaders encouraged churches to integrate "patriotic programs" into Sunday morning worship. This included buying war bonds and conserving rubber.²⁰⁷ What began as a genuine effort to protect resources in the 1930s transformed into an occasion to market her movement as patriotic in the 1940s.

PULPIT POLITICS

Because political offense can be costly, McPherson's strategy was to keep the pulpit politically neutral, although she believed the church and government worked hand-in-hand and frequently used the pulpit to advance patriotic politics. In 1936, McPherson clarified her approach to faith and politics when she learned her associate pastor, Rheba Crawford, criticized Roosevelt's liberal reforms. In an article titled "Pulpit and Politics," McPherson laid out her separatist policy explaining, "Our motto concerning politics and religion is that 'never the twain shall meet.'"²⁰⁸ In 1942 she reiterated her policy advising, "Do not talk politics; talk Jesus."²⁰⁹ Though McPherson argued separatist rhetoric, she was the worst offender of her own policy as she continued supporting New Deal reforms, peace, disarmament, conservation, and women's rights. Despite her promotion of liberal reforms, some scholars have failed to acknowledge the depth of McPherson's political activism.²¹⁰

Some have likely misjudged the extent of McPherson's politics because she masterfully disguised political speech with theological metaphor. Grant Wacker's book, *Heaven Below*, suggests that McPherson was more apolitical than political, and that her politics was not conspicuous enough to merit comment.²¹¹ Others like Sutton, however, insist McPherson was far more politically active than historians have admitted.²¹² In documenting her support for progressive reforms, Sutton believes it was McPherson's political activism that distinguishes her from her Pentecostal counterparts who argued separatist doctrine.²¹³ In *Pentecostalism in America*, Roger Robins writes that McPherson's group was far more culturally assimilated, more socially and politically engaged, and less bound to the moralistic heritage of Holiness than the average Pentecostal.²¹⁴ In fact, by World War II, The Foursquare Church was the only major white Pentecostal denomination to disavow separatism from political engagement.²¹⁵

Furthermore, McPherson's displays of patriotism may have led some scholars to overlook her more radical teachings, confusing flag waving with conservatism and uncritical obedience to government.²¹⁶ In *The Vine and the Branches*, Foursquare historian Nathaniel M. Van Cleave highlights McPherson's patriotic credentials and obedience to government during war. However, Van Cleave presents McPherson's relationship to war starting in 1942, after she abandoned peacetime pacifism and deleted the Foursquare Bylaw recognizing conscientious objectors. There is brief mention (two sentences) on Foursquare opposition to war, while entire paragraphs are devoted to Foursquare loyalty and patriotism.²¹⁷ Consequently, McPherson's objections to large-scale communal sin like violence, war, arms production, and capital punishment are absent from the official narrative.²¹⁸ Omissions like these may be due to inattentional blindness—our failure to notice the unexpected. We become so fixated on our preconceived ideals of McPherson that we block out other possibilities even when they are visible. In this case, patriotism becomes the red herring. Researchers who assume the more patriotic one is, the less

radical they must be, should be cautious. As Jay Beaman reminds us, patriotism does not always equal uncritical allegiance to all war.²¹⁹

To this day, McPherson's political views exceed the standards of many conservative Pentecostals. For example, how many pro-military, flag-waving, patriotic Pentecostals are, like McPherson, supporting global disarmament, calling for reducing military spending, opposing capital punishment, and supporting labor and welfare reform? Moreover, McPherson's political speech challenges the assumption that she accommodated and compromised herself to mainstream conservative politics and theology. She crossed conservative boundaries by incorporating both social gospel and Salvation Army themes into her ministry.²²⁰ Nevertheless, acknowledging these views can be a struggle. Some are resistant to the possibility that the founder of their movement was anything but loyal and unquestioningly patriotic to their country.²²¹ It is uncomfortable to be reminded of such counterculturalism within your denomination, especially if you adhere to an alternative ideology.²²²

JOSEPH IN AMERICA

Despite McPherson's separatist policy, by the early to mid-1930s, she began to integrate politics more explicitly into her writings.²²³ Some of her boldest criticisms of U.S. economic policies were editorialized in a column titled "Joseph in Egypt" in which she compared the unjust policies of Joseph with the unjust policies of the U.S. McPherson's commentary on Joseph is similar to Walter Brueggemann's "Food Fight of Faith." Brueggemann and McPherson identified a similar pattern: fear of scarcity (not enough) results in accumulation (hoarding) that leads to monopolies (control) which ends in violence (slavery).²²⁴

McPherson opens her editorial by criticizing Joseph's social policies. When scarcity hit Egypt, she explained, and the food ran out, people came to him for help. Instead of giving them back their own corn, he sold it to them—first for money, next in exchange for their cattle, then for their lands, and finally for their very selves. She also compared the plutocracy of Egypt with America. Both hoarded wealth. People were slaves. They were overtaxed. They were overburdened. They were starved. "People became things—cogs in a great economic wheel." The U.S., she declared, was the new Egypt. "With ten percent of the people owning, or at least controlling, ninety percent of the wealth of the country; and the foreclosure of tens of thousands of mortgages on homes, farms and factories, the title to the wealth and real property of the nation is rapidly drifting into the hands of the bankers."²²⁵

McPherson, like Brueggemann, rejected scarcity ideology.²²⁶ McPherson believed in a world of plenty, comparing the earth to an hourglass, she believed God placed enough resources down in the earth to supply the need of humanity until the day God returns.²²⁷ God never meant for humanity to be poor spiritually, physically, or materially.²²⁸

Moreover, the early Foursquare Church's attitude toward natural resources was both utilitarian and hedonistic. Resources were not to be hoarded or exploited, but used for "our need and enjoyment."²²⁹ If resources were scarce, she argued, the culprits were war, hoarding, and armament. "Famine, I repeat, always follows war." Why? Because "man-power and material are being invested in war implements instead of farming crops." She pointed to western Europe as an example. "Every present combatant country was on bread and meat cards within 90 days."²³⁰ Armament, she said, contributed towards a tortured and half-starved world. She criticized nations for taxing people on the verge of starvation to build great military machines. "If nations would stop building warships and equipping armies we would be all but overwhelmed with prosperity."²³¹

CAPITALISM

McPherson followed the capitalist storyline.²³² However, she did not take capitalism to its logical extreme of resource exploitation and wage labor. She was not anti-business. She was anti-exploitation. She did not advocate unfettered capitalism, nor did she overlook the abuses of capitalism. Admittedly, her context predates the dangers now faced from a linear economic system of extraction, production, consumption, and disposal—a system that externalizes costs through pollution, wage labor, and waste.²³³ Nevertheless, she was disenchanted with her depression era world—a world where things were no longer weighed in the balance of equity or measured with the yardstick of kindness—but "weighted on the scales of penury, against weights of gold and greenbacks."²³⁴

McPherson's welfare advocacy was as a kind of social protest to unregulated capitalism. First, her support for Roosevelt's

New Deal reforms indicates she favored government regulations on behalf of nature and labor.²³⁵ Second, she did not take an uncritical attitude toward corporations. She defended the rights of the working poor.²³⁶ Third, she led her Temple Welfare Department into partnership with the state and advocated for the development of the U.S. welfare state.²³⁷ Unlike conservative approaches to charity, her model incorporated political activism. She contributed to the progressive era tradition of moral reform by drawing on both social gospel ideals and the Pentecostal emphasis on personal regeneration.²³⁸

Although McPherson supported capitalism, she had moments of dissent. She rejected wealth concentration, criticized disparities of wealth, and believed capitalism, needed to be brought under the rule of Jesus for redemption. Capitalism, she declared, failed because it made no room for Jesus in its political program. Moreover, she believed all human institutions carried within themselves the seeds of their own destruction—"Greed, Avarice, and Lust for Gain."²³⁹ Capitalism represented "godless consumerism" in which Americans bought "everything on credit" and paid with installments of "lost lives, broken bodies, and starving children."²⁴⁰

She also compared capitalists to Al Capone. "Capone's money, although obtained from unscrupulous methods, is no more unclean than the dollars of the man who amasses his millions from underpaid factory workers." She had a message for Capone-like capitalists within her congregation. "I do not excuse Al Capone. He and all his ilk should be shut away where they cannot prey upon society. Neither do I excuse the so-called decent children who sits with folded hands in his pew on Sunday and goes out to oppress his fellows on Monday. The Bible says, 'The oppressors are consumed out of the land.' There is no place for them in heaven."²⁴¹ McPherson's views were reiterated by Foursquare pacifist leader, Charles Walkem, who defined capitalism as the "quintessence of selfishness" in which riches were made by "defrauding laborers."²⁴²

SWORDS AND PLOWSHARES

Drawing on one of her favorite anti-war themes, swords and plowshares, McPherson believed the pen (diplomacy) was mightier than the sword.²⁴³ She chastised nations for beating plowshares into "implements of death" and believed swords were responsible for earth's destruction—"the burning of homes and forests [and] vapors of poisonous gas" as well as "diseases and pestilences attacking trees, fruit, and vegetables of our land." Factories, instead of producing instruments of agriculture "turns out guns and ammunition" and instruments of death to "destroy human life."²⁴⁴

Swords also jeopardized national security. McPherson criticized Woodrow Wilson's "making the world safe for democracy" propaganda. How, she wondered, can the U.S. make the world safe for democracy while arming the world with swords? The potential for blowback was certain, she believed. We sold battleships and iron only to "get it back in bullets."²⁴⁵ Her message to America? Stop shipping "scrap-iron over to the Orient and Europe . . . those fire-arms might find lodgin your own heart."²⁴⁶

The worst kinds of politicians for McPherson were those who profited from the sword, and those who disguised greed as patriotism. She had names for them. They were cowards. They promoted "patriotic fervor" but never set foot on the battlefield. "As long as they can protect their own devoted hides and send the other fellow to the front, the clamour for war, especially when those manufacturing munitions and other war materials make it worth their while to promote the war spirit."²⁴⁷ They were also called "salesmen of death" who saw within their "grasps millions of dollars won through the death of the innocent of the earth."²⁴⁸ In Smedely Butler fashion, she noted, "At the beginning of the world war America boasted but 8, 000 millionaires. At its close she had 30,000 millionaires and several billionaires."²⁴⁹

She also compared them to a "merry-go-round of national ruin" that goes "round and round" but never goes anywhere. They were "drunk with power and ambition" with the "blood of innocents" playing on their "little merry-go-round of their unholy reign of terror." She hoped their "little merry-go-round will break down and awaken them from their illusions of national greatness and personal power." Soon they will realize they were riding a "hobby horse—a wooden horse, with wooden hopes, on a wooden political machine, in a carnival of greed and slaughter, under the canopy of a fool's paradise."²⁵⁰ She believed plowshares—a symbol of precious resources—were being melted by the gods of war and turned into swords for destroying humanity.²⁵¹ She anticipated the day when "implements of slaughter shall be devoted to the peaceful pursuits of agriculture."²⁵²

PRINCE OF PEACE

Because swords were responsible for earth's destruction, McPherson sought to combat war with the promotion of peace. Her anti-war discourse was influenced by the peacetime pacifism of the 1930s.²⁵³ She did not self-identify as a pacifist, but clearly sympathized with pacifist rhetoric. She also represented the neutralist position, or as she called it, the "stay in your own backyard" doctrine.²⁵⁴ However, she was selective in her application of peace. For example, she believed it was wrong to kill unless you were defending the United States of America.²⁵⁵ After Pearl Harbor, she abandoned peacetime convictions.²⁵⁶ The fear of another war made Christian leaders neutralists and pacifists in the 1930s. The fear of totalitarianism and Hitler made them militarists and interventionists in the 1940s.²⁵⁷ McPherson followed this trend. Nevertheless, the interwar years provided her a socially acceptable context to criticize war and its destruction.²⁵⁸

McPherson's Prince of Peace theology was simple: If you want peace, follow the Prince of Peace. Peace failed, she believed, because nations do not make room for Jesus in their political programs of peace. She wondered, how can nations have peace conferences without the Prince of Peace? This led to her poking fun at people who run to and fro with "their little paper tablets of peace, wildly searching for peace," but looking everywhere except at the Prince of Peace.²⁵⁹ When sword-wielding nations joined peace conferences, McPherson compared them to an "international Halloween party" being "held in the Haunted house of a world gone mad."²⁶⁰ Equating the political establishment to a Halloween party is fitting given she believed peace conferences were full of moral hypocrites who cried peace while their "swords were red with blood."²⁶¹ McPherson's criticism of peace, therefore, was not a slam against nonviolence, but a critique of progressive hypocrites, who, much like today, "Cry peace, but prepare for war."²⁶²

Moreover, Matthew 24 moderated McPherson's Matthew 5 pacifist appeals.²⁶³ Apart from the hypocritical demagogues of her day, she remained skeptical of peace because Jesus predicted the continuation of war.²⁶⁴ However, the foretelling of an event in scripture did not prevent McPherson from trying to make positive social change. For example, she supported prohibition and disarmament although drinking and war were end-time predictions.²⁶⁵ The same is true of conservation. She supported conservation although she believed the Bible predicted the destruction of the earth.²⁶⁶ McPherson's life challenges the assumption that dispensational pre-millennialism is always inconsistent with peace and conservation.

CONCLUSION

McPherson was a critic and apologist for war, labor, capitalism, and peace. Her life was full of moral ambiguity. She argued for lifeboat theology and was politically active. She fought racial inequality and opened segregated Foursquare churches.²⁶⁷ She supported U.S. involvement in both World Wars, yet promoted nonviolence. She advocated gender equality, yet picked mostly men to lead her organization. She supported conservation, yet believed in earth's imminent demise. She talked right and walked left. She talked left and walked right. Her life provides something for everyone—for pacifists, warriors, patriots, for right wing and left wing.

It is unfair to judge her inconsistencies too harshly. Humans are complicated creatures, and McPherson embodies all the contradictions that make us human. As Aldous Huxley once said, the only completely consistent people are the dead.²⁶⁸ Despite her inconsistencies, she took bold positions for progressive reform. She saw the need for regulations and laws to curb unjust capitalist behaviors. She rejected scarcity doctrine. She rejected concentrations of wealth. She protested war with the promotion of peace, and she believed conservation was patriotic.

McPherson believed the world should have a profound effect on Pentecostals. It should open our mouths and loosen our tongues "to protest against the sins of this generation."²⁶⁹ However, we are a distracted culture. We are distracted by our careers. We are distracted by sports. We are distracted by celebrity gossip. We are distracted by fashionable consumption. This cult of distraction, warns Chris Rojek, is designed to mask the real disintegration of culture.²⁷⁰ Everyday we are flooded with insignificant information and captivated by matters of no real importance.²⁷¹ Our attention is diverted toward the trivial, absurd, and spectacle.²⁷² Neil Postman called this "Amusing Ourselves to Death."²⁷³ McPherson called this "Fiddling While

Rome Burns.” Both were arguing the same point. Amusements pacify discontent. We are diverted away from things that really matter. McPherson’s advice? Stop fiddling your fingers. Civilization is teetering on the brink oblivion while we continue fiddling with drink, dance, and sports.²⁷⁴

McPherson’s world is not much different from today. Military budgets are overfunded. Families struggle with basic needs. Wealth remains concentrated. Politicians talk peace while they continue imperialist policies, and we still face the prospect of self-extermination through nuclear war and environmental destruction—both perpetuated by population growth, pollution, and the acceleration of technology.²⁷⁵ As Wright warns, we are falling victim to our own success (e.g. nuclear weapons and greenhouse gases).²⁷⁶ While McPherson’s generation did not push the self-destruct button, our generation may be much closer.²⁷⁷

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[159.](#) McKinley, *Jesus in the Margins*, 11.

[160.](#) McPherson, “The Inter-World Bridge of Earth and Heaven,” 5; McPherson, “Ship That Bore the Healer,” 3.

[161.](#) “Debate between Aimee Semple McPherson and Charles Lee,” 21.

[162.](#) McPherson, “The World Aflame,” 5–7.

[163.](#) McPherson, “Today in Prophecy,” 14.

[164.](#) McPherson, “The Ancient Mariner,” 3; McPherson, “Sunset Hour,” 3–4.

[165.](#) McPherson, “The Hub of The Universe,” 23.

[166.](#) McPherson, “The World Aflame,” 6, 48.

[167.](#) McPherson, “Roll Out The Barrel,” 3.

[168.](#) McPherson, “Double Cure,” 6–7; McPherson, “Little Women,” 2; “Foursquare Program Proves Women Should Preach,” 7.

[169.](#) McPherson, “Today in Prophecy,” 14–15.

[170.](#) Yoder, *Christian Attitudes to War*, 334.

[171.](#) McPherson, “Hold Your Horses,” 24–5; McPherson, “Humpty Dumpty,” 1, 3.

[172.](#) McPherson, “Behold He Cometh!,” 5.

[173.](#) McPherson, “Sherman Is Still Right,” 2.

[174.](#) Chomsky, “Human Intelligence and the Environment.” See also Challenger, *On Extinction*. Challenger shows how our human drive to exploit resources is leading toward extinction. She quotes George Perkins, who wrote, “Man is everywhere a disturbing agent . . . Whenever plants his foot, the harmonies of nature are turned to discords.” Challenger, *On Extinction*, 13.

[175.](#) McPherson, “The Blood Bank,” 6; “Church Faces World Chaos,” 3.

[176.](#) McPherson, “The Ancient Mariner,” 3; McPherson, “God’s Clock Strikes,” 1; McPherson, “Blue Beard Stalks,” 1.

[177.](#) Frost, *John F. Kennedy in Quotations*, 158.

[178.](#) Sutton, *Resurrection of Christian America*, 47.

[179.](#) McPherson, “Conformed or Transformed,” 2.

[180.](#) McPherson, “Three Blind Mice,” 1; McPherson, “The Trojan Horse,” 2.

[181.](#) McPherson, “Angelus Temple And It’s Needy,” 2.

[182.](#) McPherson, “Practical Christianity,” 1.

[183.](#) Blumhofer, *Aimee Semple McPherson*, 269.

[184.](#) McPherson, “Stunned Nation Prays as Drought Devastates,” 1; McPherson, “Flood Brings Death and Destruction,” 1.

[185.](#) McPherson, “Distress of Nations,” 2.

[186.](#) McPherson, “The Hidden Hand,” 2.

[187.](#) McPherson, “Sherman Is Still Right,” 2.

[188.](#) Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 9.

[189.](#) Sutton, “Clutching to ‘Christian’ America,” 337.

[190.](#) McPherson, “Distress of Nations,” 2.

[191.](#) “Churches Faces World Chaos,” 8.

[192.](#) Sutton, “Clutching to ‘Christian’ America,” 332.

[193.](#) “What the Church Has Done for our Nation,” 3; “Toward World Peace,” 24.

[194.](#) Sutton, “Clutching to ‘Christian’ America,” 309.

[195.](#) Sutton, *Resurrection of Christian America*, 215.

196. Sutton, "Clutching to 'Christian' America," 330–31.
197. Ray, "Aimee Semple McPherson and Her Seriously Exciting Gospel," 163. Ray notes McPherson's rejection of violence and human progress stemmed from her embrace of Calvinism's total depravity doctrine.
198. McPherson, "The Boston Revival," 11; "Index to Register of Voters Precinct No. 1145"; Sutton, *Resurrection of Christian America*, 234.
199. Todd, *Communicating Environmental Patriotism*, 6. I'm using Todd's definition of environmental patriotism.
200. McPherson, "The Prodigal Son Called Sam," 11, 14.
201. McPherson, "Los Angeles Marches On," 5.
202. Wright, *A Short History of Progress*, 105, 129. Wright argues that civilizations fall suddenly because as they reach full demand on their ecologies they become more vulnerable to natural fluctuations (84). Wright argues the first eyewitness accounts of a human-made environmental catastrophe is in the Genesis story. Not only did Adam and Eve drive themselves from Eden by exploiting this natural paradise, but the eroded landscape they left behind set the stage for Noah's flood (67–68, 75).
203. "Commissary Need Growing," 1.
204. "Sister in Great San Jose Meeting," 20.
205. Pierson, "Gas-Guzzlers a Mark of Masculinity."
206. McPherson, "The New Birth," 6–7.
207. "Forthcoming Convention to be Spiritual 'Call to Arms,'" 3.
208. McPherson, "Pulpit and Politics," 4; Sutton, "Clutching to 'Christian' America," 337; Epstein, *Sister Aimee*, 406.
209. Foursquare Annual Convention Records, 5.
210. Sutton, "Clutching to 'Christian' America," 332.
211. Wacker, *Heaven Below*, 222.
212. Sutton, "Clutching to 'Christian' America," 332.
213. Sutton, *Resurrection of Christian America*, 215.
214. Robins, *Pentecostalism in America*, 62.
215. Sutton, "Clutching to 'Christian' America," 330.
216. McPherson's sermons were saturated with metaphors of war and civic responsibility. Her patriotism was often expressed in the triplets of conservation, citizenship, and peacemaking. Moreover, her patriotic speech consisted of political polarity by blending the U.S. flag with diplomacy and military might. She did not, however, always equate the flag with militarism.
217. Van Cleave, *The Vine and the Branches*, 157–58. Edith Blumhofer, McPherson's biographer, likewise highlights McPherson's hyper-patriotism during both World Wars while omitting her interwar peacetime appeals to nonviolence. See Blumhofer, Aimee Semple McPherson, 252–53. For a history of early Foursquare attitudes on peace and war, see Pipkin, "The Foursquare Church and Pacifism."
218. Ray, "Aimee Semple McPherson and Her Seriously Exciting Gospel," 162–63.
219. Beaman and Pipkin, *Pentecostal and Holiness Statements*, 30.
220. Sutton, *Resurrection of Christian America*, 186–87.
221. I experienced this resistance when I attempted to interview a former coworker of McPherson. Because I suggested the possibility that McPherson was something more than the stereotypical patriot and pro-war theologian, she denied my interview and expressed her disdain that I would dare suggest she was anything but loyal to her country.
222. McPherson's liberal leanings are seldom highlighted and typically presented as haphazard or an exception to the Foursquare metanarrative. The McPherson I experienced in Foursquare Bible College was charismatic, conservative (except in relation to women's rights), entrepreneurial, and patriotic. These are true qualities, but selective nonetheless. For example, while it is true Martin Luther King Jr. advocated civil rights, it is equally true that he criticized capitalism, war profiteering, corporate welfare, and promoted nonviolence and civil disobedience, something rarely highlighted in the official narrative.
223. Sutton, "Clutching to 'Christian' America," 321.
224. Brueggemann, "The Food Fight of Faith."
225. McPherson, "Joseph in Egypt," 2.
226. Brueggemann, "The Liturgy of Abundance, The Myth of Scarcity."
227. McPherson, "The Hour Glass," 1; McPherson, "Sister Declares Road To God is Way Out of Depression," 6.
228. McPherson, "Jack and the Bean Stalk," 5.

- [229.](#) “Missionary Services,” 19; “News Flashes from Foursquare Mission Fields,” 9; “The Opportunity of 1928,” 4.
- [230.](#) McPherson, “Hold Your Horses,” 26.
- [231.](#) McPherson, “The Way to Disarm is to DISARM,” 3.
- [232.](#) McPherson, “Free Love In Spain,” 2.
- [233.](#) Bakan, *The Corporation*, 60–84; Heinberg, *The End of Growth*, 252.
- [234.](#) McPherson, “Fang and Claw,” 2.
- [235.](#) Sutton, *Resurrection of Christian America*, 214.
- [236.](#) Sutton, “Clutching to ‘Christian’ America,” 314; McPherson, “A Bride Adorned,” 25.
- [237.](#) Marsh, “Religious Women in Modern American Social Reform,” 117–18.
- [238.](#) Sutton, *Resurrection of Christian America*, 187.
- [239.](#) McPherson, “Behold He Cometh!,” 30; McPherson, “The Seed of Destruction,” 2.
- [240.](#) McPherson, “Bill Collectors,” 2–3.
- [241.](#) “Gates To Hell May Be Crashed, Says Pastor,” A8.
- [242.](#) Walkem, “Capitalism versus Labor, Installment II,” 8; Walkem, “Capitalism versus Labor,” 4.
- [243.](#) McPherson, “Fiddling While Rome Burns,” 9; McPherson, “The Great Emancipator,” 2; McPherson, “Swords and Plowshares.”
- [244.](#) McPherson, “Jesus is Coming Soon! Get Ready!,” 1.
- [245.](#) McPherson, “The First Peace Conference,” 3.
- [246.](#) McPherson, “Ships That Do Not Pass,” 4.
- [247.](#) McPherson, “War,” 2.
- [248.](#) “Signs of the Times,” 8; Lee, “Demonstrated Gospel,” 3.
- [249.](#) McPherson, “Comes the Dawn,” 7.
- [250.](#) McPherson, “Merry-Go-Rounds,” 2.
- [251.](#) McPherson, “Questionnaire from the N.Y.N.A.”
- [252.](#) McPherson, “Paths of Glory,” 2.
- [253.](#) Beaman and Pipkin, *Pentecostal and Holiness Statements on War and Peace*, 167–73.
- [254.](#) McPherson, “Questionnaire from the N.Y.N.A.”
- [255.](#) Sutton, *Resurrection of Christian America*, 257.
- [256.](#) McPherson, “Foursquedom and Uncle Sam,” 24; McPherson, “This is Worth Fighting For,” 4.
- [257.](#) Sittser, *A Cautious Patriotism*, 64.
- [258.](#) Pipkin, “The Foursquare Church and Pacifism,” 64–120.
- [259.](#) McPherson, “The Coming Prince of Peace,” 11–12.
- [260.](#) “Temple Pastor Depicts War-Frenzied World,” A3.
- [261.](#) McPherson, “God in American History,” 8.
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- [263.](#) McPherson, “Questionnaire from the N.Y.N.A.”
- [264.](#) McPherson, “Wars and Rumors of War,” 2; McPherson, “Behold He Cometh,” 30; McPherson, “When is He Coming?,” 6.
- [265.](#) McPherson, “God in American History,” 8; “The Way to Disarm is to DISARM,” J3.
- [266.](#) McPherson, “Shine as the Stars Forever,” 20.
- [267.](#) Sutton, *Resurrection of Christian America*, 31–32.
- [268.](#) Huxley, “Wordsworth in the Tropics.”
- [269.](#) McPherson, “Spiritual Unrest,” 2.
- [270.](#) Rojek, *Celebrity*, 90.

[271.](#) Chomsky, *Understanding Power*, 98–100.

[272.](#) Hedges, *Empire of Illusion*, 27, 182.

[273.](#) Postman, *Amusing Ourselves To Death*, xi.

[274.](#) McPherson, “Fiddling While Rome Burns,” 9.

[275.](#) Wright, *A Short History of Progress*, 128.

[276.](#) Ibid., 56.

[277.](#) Hennen, Miller, and McLaughlin, “U.N. Climate Change Report”; Tupper, “Evangelical Scientists Call for Climate Action.”