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The Environmental Theology of Aimee Semple McPherson (Chapter 4 of Blood Cries Out: Pentecostals, Ecology, and the Groans of Creation)

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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.” 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—but most remained underdeveloped. Moreover, her theology was largely anthropocentric. People, not the environment, occupied the center of her doctrine. 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 weather 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.” 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.

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. Because of poisonous bombs “nothing shall ever grow again where they fall, for the poisonous gases will destroy all vegetation.” 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.

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. She appealed to other nations to stop rolling out “barrels” of hunger, poison, hate, and munitions.

**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. Moreover, she interpreted the “groans of creation” (Rom 8:22) as earth waiting to be delivered from wars, bloodshed, and earthquakes. 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. McPherson echoed these moral concerns by consistently rejecting the invention and use of poisonous bombs. She believed these new poisonous gases would make World War I look like a child’s play toy. 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. 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. 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.” 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.”

**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. 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. 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. 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.

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.” Historian Edith Blumhofer notes that McPherson’s practical response to crisis reflects her desire to help the needy. 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.”  

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.”  

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.” 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.”  

Although she blamed Satan for ecological destruction and war, she was not an archetype of the demon-behind-the-bush brand of Pentecostalism. 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.

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 predeterminedness. “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.” 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 reform or improvement movements; for she is doomed to go down, patches and all.” 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.  

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. 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. 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. Her life provides a critique of the partisan direction in which subsequent Pentecostal movements traveled. 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. 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. She believed in environmental patriotism—the belief that a country’s greatness is defined by its environment. 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.\textsuperscript{200} She also said California was Uncle Sam’s favorite child as it offered the best in resources.\textsuperscript{201} McPherson, I believe, scratched the surface of what historian Ronald Wright argues in \textit{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.”\textsuperscript{202}

McPherson observed state conservation laws. For example, her Temple Welfare Department re-routed commissary items to conserve rubber and gas.\textsuperscript{203} She also exchanged her vehicle for a buggy to conserve gasoline.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{207} What began as a genuine effort to protect resources in the 1930s transformed into an occasion to market their 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, Rhea 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.’”\textsuperscript{208} In 1942 she reiterated her policy advising, “Do not talk politics; talk Jesus.”\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{210}

Some have likely misjudged the extent of McPherson’s politics because she masterfully disguised political speech with theological metaphor. Grant Wacker’s book, \textit{Heaven Below}, suggests that McPherson was more apolitical than political, and that her politics was not conspicuous enough to merit comment.\textsuperscript{211} Others like Sutton, however, insist McPherson was far more politically active than historians have admitted.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{213} In \textit{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.\textsuperscript{214} In fact, by World War II, The Foursquare Church was the only major white Pentecostal denomination to disavow separatism from political engagement.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{216} In \textit{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.\textsuperscript{217} Consequently, McPherson’s objections to large-scale communal sin like violence, war, arms production, and capital punishment are absent from the official narrative.\textsuperscript{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.  

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. 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. It is uncomfortable to be reminded of such counterculturalism within your denomination, especially if you adhere to an alternative ideology.

JOSEPH IN AMERICA

Despite McPherson’s separatist policy, by the early to mid-1930s, she began to integrate politics more explicitly into her writings. 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).

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.”

McPherson, like Brueggemann, rejected scarcity ideology. 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. God never meant for humanity to be poor spiritually, physically, or materially.

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.” 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.” 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.”

CAPITALISM

McPherson followed the capitalist storyline. 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 predated 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. 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.”

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. Second, she did not take an uncritical attitude toward corporations. She defended the rights of the working poor. Third, she led her Temple Welfare Department into partnership with the state and advocated for the development of the U.S. welfare state. 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.

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.” Capitalism represented “godless consumerism” in which Americans bought “everything on credit” and paid with installments of “lost lives, broken bodies, and starving children.”

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.” 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.”

**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. 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.”

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.” Her message to America? Stop shipping “scrap-iron over to the Orient and Europe . . . those fire-arms might find lodging your own heart.”

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.” 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.” 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.”

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.”

She believed plowshares—a symbol of precious resources—were being melted by the gods of war and turned into swords for destroying humanity. She anticipated the day when “implements of slaughter shall be devoted to the peaceful pursuits of agriculture.”
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. 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. 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. After Pearl Harbor, she abandoned peacetime convictions. 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. McPherson followed this trend. Nevertheless, the interwar years provided her a socially acceptable context to criticize war and its destruction.

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. 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.” 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.” 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.”

Moreover, Matthew 24 moderated McPherson’s Matthew 5 pacifist appeals. Apart from the hypocritical demagogues of her day, she remained skeptical of peace because Jesus predicted the continuation of war. 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. The same is true of conservation. She supported conservation although she believed the Bible predicted the destruction of the earth. 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. 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. 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.” 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. Everyday we are flooded with insignificant information and captivated by matters of no real importance. Our attention is diverted toward the trivial, absurd, and spectacle. Neil Postman called this “Amusing Ourselves to Death.” 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 of 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-extinction 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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“Paths of Glory.” *Foursquare Crusader* December 30, 1936) 2.

“Practical Christianity.” *Foursquare Crusader* (February 19, 1936) 1.


“Pulpit and Politics.” *Foursquare Crusader* (June 24, 1936) 4.

“Questionnaire from the N.Y.N.A.” N.d. ICFG Corporate Documents.

“Roll Out The Barrel.” *Foursquare Crusader* (September 13, 1939) 3.


“Shine as the Stars Forever.” *Bridal Call Foursquare* (June 1927) 20.

“Sister Declares Road To God is Way Out of Depression.” *Bridal Call-Crusader Foursquare* (June 26, 1935) 6.

“Spiritual Unrest.” *Foursquare Crusader* (June 23, 1937) 2.

“Stunned Nation Prays as Drought Devastates.” *Foursquare Crusader* (July 22, 1936) 1.

“Sunset Hour.” *Foursquare Crusader* September 7 (1927) 3–4.


“This is Worth Fighting For.” *Foursquare Crusader* (November 14, 1942) 4.

“Three Blind Mice.” *Foursquare Crusader* (September 23, 1936) 1.


“The Trojan Horse.” *Foursquare Crusader* (February 17, 1937) 2.


“Wars and Rumors of War.” *Foursquare Crusader* (November 17, 1937) 2.

“When is He Coming?” *Bridal Call* (December 1920) 6.


“Missionary Services.” *Foursquare Crusader* (November 1943) 19.

“News Flashes from Foursquare Mission Fields.” *Foursquare Crusader* (September 1942) 9.


“Signs of the Times.” *Bridal Call-Crusader Foursquare* (July 11, 1935) 8.


“Sister in Great San Jose Meeting.” *Foursquare Crusader* (July 1943) 20.


“What The Church Has Done For Our Nation.” *Foursquare Crusader* (April 8, 1936) 3.

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.
199. Todd, Communicating Environmental Patriotism, 6. I’m using Todd’s definition of environmental patriotism.
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).
204. “Sister in Great San Jose Meeting,” 20.
205. Pierson, “Gas-Guzzlers a Mark of Masculinity.”
207. “Forthcoming Convention to be Spiritual ‘Call to Arms,’” 3.
211. Wacker, Heaven Below, 222.
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.”
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.
244. McPherson, “Jesus is Coming Soon! Get Ready!,” 1.
251. McPherson, “Questionnaire from the N.Y.N.A.”
254. McPherson, “Questionnaire from the N.Y.N.A.”
256. McPherson, “Foursquaredom and Uncle Sam,” 24; McPherson, “This is Worth Fighting For,” 4.
258. Pipkin, “The Foursquare Church and Pacifism,” 64–120.
263. McPherson, “Questionnaire from the N.Y.N.A.”


276. Ibid., 56.