

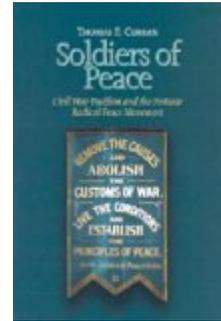
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Thomas F. Curran. *Soldiers of Peace: Civil War Pacifism and the Postwar Radical Peace Movement*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2003. xv + 228 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8232-2210-0.

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## The Problems of Perfectionist Pacifism

Thomas Curran has created an intriguing exploration of an overlooked group of antiwar Americans in the second half of the nineteenth century. Growing out of his dissertation at Notre Dame, this monograph examines the beliefs and activities of a group Curran describes as “perfectionist pacifists” during the Civil War and after, following it into the early twentieth century. The book is effectively divided into two parts, the first examining the group’s formation in opposition to the Civil War, and the second detailing the postwar creation and actions of the Universal Peace Union (UPU), an organization dedicated to the principles of perfectionist pacifism.

Alfred H. Love, a Philadelphia woolens merchant, dedicated pacifist, and long-time president of the UPU, is at the center of Curran’s narrative. Perfectionist pacifists, as Curran uses the term, shared “Love’s dedication to God’s laws, his faith in perfectibility, his rejection of the use of force, and his opposition to the war” (p. 2). These men and women believed that by perfectly following God’s laws they could achieve the millennial kingdom of God on earth. Among the most significant of these precepts was the idea of nonresistance, that evil must not be met with violence; sinful actions should not be met with other sinful actions, no matter how noble the goal. Instead, evils such as slavery (which the perfectionists abhorred) should be met with moral suasion and visions of “God’s blueprint for humanity” (p. xiii). They shared a religious belief system that aimed to return the Christian church to an idealized, simplified time.

The group formed in opposition to the Civil War and continued to work after the conflict to bring about a perfect world through nonviolence, education and reform. More a group of people with a shared set of beliefs than a separate religious sect, in its simplest form, Curran’s perfectionist pacifists were those people who made up the UPU, organized in 1866 and lasting until 1920.

Curran traces the antebellum ideological roots of perfectionist pacifism to several Northern sources, including Garrisonian abolitionists such as Adin Ballou and Henry Clarke Wright (though many Garrisonians abandoned nonviolence in the 1850s); perfectionist, nonresistant religious sects such as the Shakers, the Rogerene Quakers, and the Bible Church of Philadelphia; and a couple of key thinkers, Lucretia Mott and Alfred Love. Although most Quakers were not perfectionist pacifists, Mott and Love were heavily influenced by their Quaker backgrounds.

Northern advocates of nonresistance had trouble remaining pacifist during the Civil War as public sentiment allowed little room for opposition. Most Northern evangelicals saw the conflict as a noble, holy emancipationist fight. Even the largest antebellum peace organization, the American Peace Society, endorsed the Union war effort. Amidst such sentiment, perfectionist pacifists found their antiwar arguments—made in speeches, published pamphlets and letters to Garrison’s unsympathetic *Liberator*—were received as treasonous or cowardly.

Federal conscription forced perfectionist pacifists to

deal directly with a government whose laws conflicted with their view of God's laws. Alfred Love himself was one of the first draftees in Philadelphia. He rejected offers from friends to pay his commutation or serve in his place, even when he found that his religious beliefs did not exempt him. He was finally excused for poor eyesight, although he never asked for such a release. Other persistent nonresistance advocates were not so lucky and were forced into the military, where they were poorly treated.

Curran argues that wartime efforts brought the perfectionist pacifists together and, troubled by immediate postwar Northern calls for vengeance, they formed the Universal Peace Society in May 1866 (later the UPU). This radical peace organization rejected all violence, declared the equality of all people, and called for human governments to conform to God's laws. Love played a key role in creating the organization, co-writing its constitution. He was named the society's first president, a role he held until his death in 1913, and Curran convincingly argues that Love's views dominated the organization during its existence, especially his toleration of dissent. The new society found members and allies among some antebellum nonresistant abolitionists (even some Garrisonians who had supported the war), certain radical Quakers and Shakers, and several women's reform groups, especially the Women's Christian Temperance Union. The UPU created active local branches (twenty-one by 1880, and forty by 1900), mostly in the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast. Although UPU members included non-pacifists and non-perfectionists, perfectionist pacifism was the organization's dominant theme. As a result, many potential members of a peace organization such as Quakers, Mennonites, and Dunkers shied away, while Civil War veterans and the late-nineteenth-century press ridiculed its goals as naive and, at times, treasonous.

The UPU's campaign for peace was more than just an idealistic opposition to war. In order to achieve their ultimate goal of achieving a "Universal Republic" in which all nations would submit to divine law, the UPU called for disarmament, arbitration, and the creation of an international court and participated in numerous international peace conferences. UPU members saw themselves as already citizens in God's kingdom, with an obligation to enlighten others. If they could bring the United States in line with God's laws, then it would serve as a successful model for other nations. Specifically, Curran explores how this approach resulted in UPU advocacy of social justice for Native Americans, African Americans, women, and workers. But, the UPU's goals went beyond

just changing laws or governmental policy—in fact, members often rejected part or all of the federal government as unredeemable. The organization also worked to convince the American public to embrace what the UPU saw as the true Christian ideals.

The UPU used pamphlets, lectures, conferences, flags, songs, and the society's newspaper to attempt to convince Americans to change their lives to one of nonresistance. They also lobbied politicians at every level of government. Such a broad spectrum of activities spread the relatively few members of the UPU thin, undermining their chances at effecting change. Yet, as Curran details, despite widespread opposition in the United States to most of their beliefs, the members of the UPU believed that they were doing God's will and would eventually succeed.

The UPU faced obvious impediments to its goals, but one of Curran's themes is that perfectionist pacifists themselves created many of those barriers. Building on Jean Soderlund's work on eighteenth-century Quakers, Curran describes a tension among perfectionist pacifists between a "tribal" urge to separate themselves from those who did not adhere to the same strict beliefs and the "humanitarian" desire to engage with others to bring them in line with God's laws (p. 3).[1] Their narrow definition of perfect Christian behavior (and the condescension that sometimes followed) discouraged potential members who might have been attracted by their egalitarianism, and their unwillingness to support politicians who were not perfectionist pacifists gave them little leverage when lobbying.

The bottom line, one might argue, is that the UPU and other pacifist organizations failed in their peace mission (the Spanish-American war happened despite their protests and World War I began the year after Love's death), and that the UPU's social justice efforts had little effect. Yet Curran asserts that the UPU's significance goes beyond its failures. Instead, he contends that the group was important for its continuation of a perfectionist tradition that was largely lost during the Civil War and for its radical commentary on late-nineteenth-century American society. In addition, Curran argues that the UPU's fight for nonresistance and social equality made the group "the most radical American peace organization" of the 1800s and built the foundation for a "modern peace movement, one that combined the quest for a war-free world with a commitment to attaining social justice for all," seen in the twentieth century in groups such as the Women's Peace Union and the American Friends Ser-

vice Committee (p. xiv).

Overall, Curran's narrative and analysis are strong, especially considering the limited archival sources available on the UPU. Curran relies heavily on Love's journal, UPU newspapers, the surviving UPU records, and on a skillful use of secondary and printed primary sources. Still, sources are an issue at times, especially during the discussion of the Civil War. It is not clear how many people actually fit into Curran's perfectionist pacifist category during the war. He cites the experiences of non-resistant draftees like Love and radical abolitionist John Wesley Pratt, but there are few other examples, making it difficult to see how widespread these perfectionist pacifists were during the war.

Ultimately, Curran's story is a history of Alfred Love

and the UPU, a relatively unsuccessful organization with relatively few active members—Curran notes that “of the 3,000 to 4,000 members the UPU claimed at its peak, only about 400 actively participated in UPU ventures” (p. 115). Still, that should not take away from a work filled with quality research and analysis. Curran could very easily have reached too far here, but he manages to argue no more than what his sources allow, and in doing so has created an extremely useful account of an unfairly overlooked group in American history. Those interested in American pacifism, social justice, and religious activism should pick this book up themselves.

Note

[1]. Jean Soderlund, *Quakers and Slavery: A Divided Spirit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

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