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Between Piety and Polity
The American Catholic Response to the First Atomic Bombs
Emma Catherine Scally ’18

In August of 1945 the United States dropped the “Little Boy” and the “Fat Man” on the respective cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, causing a combined death toll of at least 135,000. Although the atomic bombings in 1945 have not been excluded from the United States’ contemporary national narrative, one of the more underemphasized aspects of this history is the unsettling and often unclear relationship between Catholicism and American nuclear politics that began in 1945 and extended throughout the entire Cold War. Of the 135,000 Japanese who died from burns, radiation, and other atomic bomb-related injuries, at least 7,000 of those casualties were Japanese Catholics, though that estimate seems conservative when one remembers that the “Fat Man” was dropped in Japan’s most Christian-populated city and even landed next to the Urakami Catholic Cathedral.1 The Japanese Catholic victims of the “Fat Man,” however, were probably unaware that the weapon which would ultimately decimate a large proportion of their Catholic community was blessed by Father George Zabelka, a Catholic Chaplain in the U.S. Army, and dropped by Major Charles W. Sweeney, also an American Catholic in the military.

At first glance, one might interpret Zabelka and Sweeney’s involvement in the atomic bomb as isolated acts, as they appear in hindsight as blatantly contrary to the Catholic doctrines of peace. However, a closer examination reveals that American Catholics in 1945 were not uniformly against the United States’ use of the bomb. Instead they were divided on the subject. Given this divide, one might ask: How did the unclear relationship between Catholicism and the United States’ nuclear politics in 1945 transform into a unified anti-Communist partnership at the dawn of the Cold War in 1949? One way to explore that trajectory is through an examination of the historical records of 1945, 1946, and 1949, as these years demonstrate the most significant periods of change in the relationship between American Catholics and their nation’s nuclear politics. In the first frame, which is August 1945, American Catholics did not share a unified stance on their nation’s use of nuclear weapons in Japan. While some of the aforementioned population saw the atomic bomb as a viable tool to end Japan’s aggression in World War II, others believed the use of the

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American Catholics & the Atomic Bomb

weapon was unquestionably immoral. However, by 1946, when the patriotism of America’s victory had subsided, American Catholics were again divided on the issue of the atomic bomb, but for different reasons. In response to rumors of the Soviet proliferation of nuclear weaponry, American Catholics either condemned the bomb as dangerous to peace or perceived it as a legitimate means to curb Russia’s influence.

Nevertheless, American Catholics held a divided opinion on the bomb until 1949, when the U.S.S.R. detonated its first nuclear weapon, RDS-1. This test marked a significant change in American Catholic attitudes towards the Soviet Union because their earlier reactions in 1945 and 1946 were based on the assumption that while Soviet scientists were trying to develop their own bomb, they had not succeeded in it. However, now that the United States’ enemy (who also happened to be overtly anti-religion) possessed the ability to wage a nuclear warfare, most American Catholics changed their once divided beliefs and assumed a pro-bomb stance. That “pro-bomb stance,” however, was more of a position against Communism than support for the creation and use of atomic weapons. American Catholic support for the United States’ nuclear weaponry in the post-WWII era is, therefore, the forgotten roots of their later anti-Communist movement in the Cold War. It is thus essential to understand how American Catholics were divided on the subject of the atomic bomb until Russia tested its first atomic weapon in 1949, which was a pivotal turning point in the American Catholic support for nuclear weaponry as protection against Communism.

II. American Catholics Immediate Response to the Atomic Bomb (1945)

When the words “Atomic Bomb Hits Japan!” sprawled across headlines on August 7th and August 10th, the American Catholic community did not immediately produce a unified response to the news. While some cheered loudly for the United States’ impending victory, others voiced their concerns about the moral implications of such indiscriminate violence. Most, however, tended to take either an ambiguous stance to the use of the atomic bomb, as it seemed unclear if and how Catholicism could be reconciled with the United States’ decision to apply their nuclear abilities in Japan. Within the boarder context of the twentieth century, such a union between religion and politics was particularly important for many American Catholics, as the latter community were keenly aware of the rise in anti-Catholic sentiments as well as the increasing secularization of American society.2 Thus, in being dually Catholic and American, many struggled over which identity should be prioritized over the other. Although many were unwilling to completely abandon their religious principles, Catholics in the United States also did not want to appear unpatriotic to the nation. The defining question for such a community came down to whether they were first

Americans or first Catholics?

Examination of the public record suggests that many constituents of the Catholic lay community supported the United States decision to drop atomic bombs in 1945 because they viewed that as being loyal Americans. One explanation for this support is the place in which American Catholics were situated within the broader socio-political context of World War II’s end. Like their secular compatriots, ordinary American Catholics found it difficult to criticize the bomb, as they understood that the utilization of nuclear weaponry had led to Japan’s surrender, thereby saving the lives of American soldiers and ending the war on the Pacific front. Thus, in the days and weeks following the detonation of the atomic bombs, many Americans chose to celebrate the war’s end and ignore the devastation that their nation had inflicted on Japan. This was illustrated in American Catholics’ attendance at the so-called “Victory Masses” that were held in churches across the United States. For example, on August 20th of 1945, four thousand American Catholics gathered for a special service at St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City to, “…join the nation in offering prayers for peace and its heroes.” The large number of communicants present at these masses demonstrates that many Catholics in the United States were more inclined to participate in celebrations of World War II’s end, rather than discuss the means through which that end was achieved. Although not all members of the Catholic lay community were swept up in the tide of unquestioning patriotism, it is reasonable to conclude that political considerations were a significant reason behind ordinary American Catholics’ support of the bomb, even though the use of nuclear weapons against a civilian population could have been interpreted as contradictory to Catholic teaching and dogma.

The sermons of these “Victory Masses” also serve the purpose of demonstrating the ambiguous position of American priests in the days after the U.S. incinerated Hiroshima and Nagasaki. While “peace” was an explicit theme during the masses, a collective examination of the public record reveals that many sermons lack a direct commentary on the atomic bomb and the implications of its use in Japan. The absence of these discussions on the morality or necessity of using nuclear weapons against civilians serves as a clear demonstration of the tension that existed between American Catholics and the national politics. Similar to their lay counterparts, ordained Catholic across the United States likely wanted to avoid criticizing Truman as Catholic priests were likely to have had friends, family members, and parishioners who were fighting in the war. Moreover, as leaders of their local Church communities, it seems that priests likely avoided making controversial statements on the use of nuclear weaponry because the atomic bomb was assumed to be an unfortunate but one-time tactic. In other words, many believed that no additional global power would engage in another nuclear operation, as it was widely accepted,

at least among the public, that the United States was the only nation equipped with the knowledge and resources to create an atomic bomb. Thus, if the incineration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were expected to be isolated incidents not to be repeated, priests could ignore the implications of the nuclear bombs by focusing instead on the United States’ victory in World War II, thereby avoiding altogether the American Catholic dilemma of having to pit religious teachings against the national nuclear politics.

Besides, the American Catholics who did worry that the bomb was an act contrary to their religion could be assuaged by political indoctrination that professed the bomb to be reconcilable with morality. Hours after the second bomb was dropped on Nagasaki, President Truman gave a historic address to the American people on the Potsdam Conference. Towards the end of this widely broadcasted speech, however, Truman mentioned the United States’ use of atomic weaponry in Japan. He told his audience that, “...we thank God that [the atomic bomb] has come to us, instead of to our enemies; and we pray that He may guide us to use it in His ways and for His purposes.”4 Although Truman was not explicitly speaking to one religious community over another, the clear implication in the speech is that use of the atomic bomb could be morally justified, a message that would have been applicable to American Catholic listeners in the audience. However, beyond mere applicability, Truman’s rhetoric was likely even appealing to American Catholics. By including the phrases “His ways” and “His purposes,” which indicate that the United States’ attack on Japan was in accordance with God’s wishes, Truman was able to at least temporarily subdue the questions about the moral implications of nuclear warfare that American Catholics and other religious groups might have otherwise voiced.

In some sense, Truman’s union of God and the atomic bomb echoes the “Just War” theory, which some American Catholics used to legitimize their nation’s use of the atomic bomb in the days following the bombing of Japan. By definition, such a theory determines whether or not conduct in war could be characterized as just or moral. There are several ways to measure the justness of actions in war, the most common being proportionality, and military necessity.5 In the public record, the latter element of the “Just War” theory was frequently referenced by American Catholics as a justification for the United States’ use of the atomic bombs. This can be evidenced, for example, by the Catholic Laymen’s Association of Georgia dispatch in a newspaper called The Bulletin. Here, a Catholic priest by the name of Father Mecelwane is quoted as saying:

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5 Charles Guthrie, Just War: The Just War Tradition: Ethics in Modern War (United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC), 45, 52.
Modern warfare is an armed struggle between nations. The object of each side is to win the war, that is, to force the opposite side to surrender by making it difficult or impossible for it to wage further warfare. Provided the war is a just war, the choice of weapon is immaterial as far as morality is concerned. The quicker an attacking enemy is brought to his knees and forced to surrender, the better it is for all concerned.6

Although the United States citizenry was aware of the fact that the atomic bomb was directed at a civilian population and caused significant damage, Mcelwane’s quote draws from the military necessity aspect of the “Just War” theory. With the claim that the United States’ use of nuclear weapons was “necessary,” not merely sufficient, to end the war in the Pacific, American Catholics could consider the devastation and destruction of Japan as unfortunate collateral damage. Certainly, the proportionality and civilian elements of the “Just War” theory were also arguments that occasionally buttressed the claim that the bomb was unjust. However, since the majority of the 1945 publications examined for this historical investigation focus on how the “Just War” theory could support the atomic bomb, one can conclude that many American Catholics sought to reconcile their religion with their nation’s nuclear politics by arguing that the latter was morally permissible and justified.

Despite the widespread support of the U.S.’ decision to drop the atomic bomb, there still existed members of the Catholic community who outright opposed atomic bombs and their use. Those who spoke out against the bomb mostly were priests and ordained theologians, who identified as Catholic Americans and were not as integrated into the patriotic and pro-bomb tide as their lay counterparts. Many of these opponents of the atomic bomb raised questions of moral implications of U.S.’ aggression in Japan, which demonstrates that some American Catholics were cognizant and vocal about the quandary between the Catholic teachings of peace and America’s use of nuclear weapons. For example, the Arkansas Catholic quoted Father John K. Ryan, a professor at the Catholic University of America as saying that, “[t]he story of the atomic bomb should fill us with dismay.”7 Given that this publication was released on August 10th, 1945, a single day after the “Fat Man” incinerated Nagasaki, one can understand that there was not necessarily a broad pro-bomb consensus among Catholic Americans in August of 1945. Instead, those who did not participate in the wave of unquestioning patriotism believed that the United States’ incineration of Japan could not be reconciled with Catholic teaching on the sanctity of human life.

In many ways, one can better understand the uncertainty of the United States’ Catholic community through an examination of the Vatican’s own ambiguous and often contradictory position on nuclear weaponry, which influenced how American

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Catholics themselves interpreted the atomic bomb. As early as 1943, Pope Pius XII had spoken out in opposition to the use of nuclear weapons saying that, “…it should be of utmost importance that the energy originated should not be let loose to explode.” 8 However, once the United States dropped the bombs on Japan, the Vatican’s seemingly clear position on nuclear weaponry became muddied by the Pope’s subsequent actions. Although the L’Osservatore Romano, Rome’s official newspaper, had published an editorial that harshly criticized President Truman’s decision to use the bomb, the Pontiff retracted similar statements that were published in the Stars and Stripes, a newspaper for soldiers, and classified them as “not authorized.” 9 As commented on by the New York Times, Pope Pius XII’s decision to remain ambiguous on international affairs was unsurprising, as the Vatican, “…in general prefers to remain… ‘gray’ rather than taking a stand that would make it ‘black’ or ‘white’ on controversial issues.” 10 Such vagueness serves to underscore the argument that tension existed between Catholicism and American politics, as the Vatican was careful to avoid offending American Catholic soldiers and criticizing President Truman’s political decisions. Rome’s decision to remain “gray” on the atomic bomb issue is a critical part in understanding the American Catholic community’s divided reactions over the bomb. The ambiguous stance did not guide American Catholics towards support of, or opposition to, the bomb but instead provided a milieu for a series of widely different interpretations on nuclear weaponry and the United States’ use of it to emerge.

III. American Catholic Opinions on the Atomic Bomb in the Post-War era (1946)

However, in the months following the detonation of the atomic bombs on Japan, the enthusiasm over the United States’ victory in both Japan and World War II began to lose its influence over the American citizenry. In turn, the spirit of once unquestioning patriotism was replaced by questions that explored the morality and necessity of the United States’ use of the atomic bomb. At that same historical moment, however, rumors of Russia’s ability to develop its own nuclear weapons also created a sense of fear in the national conscious, as the American citizenry worried that they be the victim of a future act of nuclear retaliation by a hostile nation. 11 Thus, once the figurative dust from World War II had settled, the American Catholic community was once again divided over the atomic bomb, though for different reasons than in 1945.

Just as the early anti-bomb sentiments in 1945 had consisted mainly of American

9 “No Vatican Stand is Taken on Bomb.” New York Times, Aug. 8, 1945.
10 “No Vatican Stand is Taken on Bomb.”
Catholic priests, the ordained again formed the backbone of the United States’ anti-bomb movement in 1946. This was exemplified in priests’ sermons, which were used as outlets to express condemnations of the United States’ decision to decimate Hiroshima and Nagasaki. For example, on April 7th, 1946, several months after the bombings, Monsignor Fulton J. Sheen spoke to an audience at St. Patrick’s Cathedral on the immorality of nuclear weapons. He described the attack on Japan as an act contrary to the moral law, claiming that it “...[did] away with the moral distinction that must be made in every war—a distinction between civilians and the military.”

Sheen’s argument here draws from the “Just War” theory, as it emphasizes the “distinction” aspect, which claims that, for conduct in war to be considered just, it must not be directed at non-combatants. Given that the “Just War” theory was used earlier in 1945 to support the use of the atomic bomb, these mainstream publications demonstrate how the American public’s perception had changed in the post-World War II era. With rumors spreading about the Soviet Union’s efforts to develop their own atomic bomb, people increasingly realized that the United States’ attack on Japan was not guaranteed to be the last display of nuclear force, which in turn promoted Catholics—especially the ordained—to discuss the moral implications of nuclear warfare.

However, while some American Catholics assumed a skeptical attitude towards the atomic bomb in 1946, the post-World War II era also saw an increase in anti-Communist sentiments. The rise of American Catholic anti-Communism primarily stemmed from the corresponding surge in rumors about the proliferation of Russia’s own nuclear capabilities. Since the Soviet Union was purported to be anti-religious and American Catholics were already concerned with the rising secularism of the United States, religious communities like the American Catholics perceived the U.S.S.R. as a threat. Thus, although the American Catholic population, especially the ordained, began to condemn the bomb as immoral in 1946, growing anti-Communism sentiments were starting to undermine that opposition to the bomb. These two responses to the political anxiety of 1946 would ultimately persist until 1949 when anti-Communism would prevail and subdue the anti-bomb voices.

Beginning in 1946, Catholic Americans, in response to the rumors of Russia gaining knowledge of the atomic technology began to push for a U.S. hegemony in atomic resources. These discussions about control started after the Franck Report was released to the public in 1946. This report was produced by several prominent American nuclear scientists in June of 1945, one month before the atomic bombs were dropped, and predicted that Russia could engineer their own atomic bomb by

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13 Guthrie, Just War: The Just War Tradition: Ethics in Modern Warfare.
1950. The committee of scientists also concluded that if the U.S. dropped the bombs on Japan, a nuclear arms race would ensue and could not be prevented, “...either by keeping secret from the competing nations the basic scientific facts of nuclear power or by cornering raw materials required for such a race.” From these findings, the scientists of the Franck Report advised the United States to adopt a policy of international control instead.\textsuperscript{15} Once this report was released to the public a year later, Catholic groups responded by arguing instead for the United States’ exclusive control of atomic weaponry, as they feared any augmentation of Russia’s power. This was on display, for example, at the annual convention for Catholic War Veterans of America, which took place on June 22nd of 1946. Here, the Catholic Veterans of World War II passed a resolution that demanded nuclear secrets be exclusively held by the United States and kept from Russia.\textsuperscript{16} Such a proposal thus demonstrates how Catholic Americans, especially the lay population, were beginning to see the bomb as a tool to curb Russia and its communist ideologies.

The questions over Russia’s development of nuclear weaponry and control of “atomic secrets” also extended to the Vatican, which slowly began to publicly support the atomic bomb as a tool to limit Russia’s international influence. For example, just two weeks after the annual convention for Catholic War Veterans of America, the \textit{New York Times} published a translation of an article about the atomic control that was published in the \textit{L’Osservatore Romano} on July 2nd of 1946. The newspaper report underscored that the U.S.’ recent atomic tests at Bikini were not as catastrophic as expected, saying that “…that there would be less danger of war if the statesmen charged with making peace knew that the threat of explosives infinitely more powerful than those use hitherto hung over their heads.”\textsuperscript{17} This implies, though not outwardly, the Vatican saw a U.S. hegemony in atomic knowledge as a way to maintain an international balance of power. In an ironic twist the same newspaper, which was now encouraging the use of the nuclear knowledge for peace had earlier published a scathing criticism of the United States’ use of the atom bomb in 1945. In effect, the Vatican’s approval of the U.S.’ tests at Bikini in 1946 undoubtedly reassured the American Catholic community that it was acceptable to support the atomic bomb when external factors (i.e., Russia’s “atheistic” Communism) posed an existential threat to their Catholic community.

\textbf{IV. American Catholic Opinions at the Dawn of the Cold War (1949)}

These anti-bomb and anti-Communism sentiments expressed by American Catholics in 1946 remained until the middle of 1949. However, the anti-bomb

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position gradually disappeared after September 23rd. On that day President Truman announced to the American Public that an atomic explosion had occurred in the U.S.S.R. Just as this event can be identified as a turning point in the trajectory of the Cold War, as it was the most contributive factor in Truman’s decision to develop the H-bomb, the discovery of the Soviet’s nuclear developments was also transformative in American Catholics opinion on the atomic bomb. In effect, the discovery of Russia’s first atomic test led the American Catholic population to understand Russia’s nuclear capabilities as reality rather than rumor, which in turn prompted the American Catholic community to develop a broad consensus towards pro-bomb and anti-Communism.

The Soviet atomic test hardened ordinary American Catholics’ attitude towards Russia. Subsequently, a large proportion of them joined the ranks of the preexisting anti-Communism movement. Although the ordained population had largely been the driving force behind the exploration of the atomic bomb’s morality, any indifference or skepticism that the lay community might have harbored was eclipsed by the considerations of the future. This can be evidenced by the shift in the focus of Catholic newspapers in late 1949. Once the Soviet Union’s atomic test was discovered, many of the publications in the historical record began to increasingly emphasize a new moral quandary, which was the Soviet Union’s crimes against Catholic populations in Eastern Europe. For example, in the October 7th, 1949 edition of the *Arkansas Catholic*, one of the front-page stories was an article on Russia’s “war” on the Catholic Church in Hungary that helped spread of “anti-Communist” propaganda around the world. Although this newspaper and others similar to it do not explicitly express pro-bomb sentiments, the clear anti-Russian tone that developed in these sources after 1949 indicates a general shift in American Catholics’ thinking. From there onwards, instead of rehearsing the incineration of Japan, Catholics in the United States increasingly directed their efforts on the ways in which they could prevent the spread of Russia’s “anti-religious” ideologies, an issue that lay organizations would later try and solve by proposing an expansion of the United States’ nuclear arsenal.

Perhaps the most surprising response to the Soviet Union’s first atomic test was that of American Catholic priests, who, according to the public record, mostly began to publicly support the bomb as a tool to restrain the power and international standing of Russia. One of the most notable examples of these pro-bomb priests is Father Edmund A. Walsh S.J., who served as President Truman’s “most trusted

advisor” on Russian affairs. According to biographer Patrick McNamara, the aforementioned priest insisted that 1949 was an opportune time for, “…the nation to exercise its ‘destined mission’ of power,” and that such a mission should, “…[include] the use of atomic power.” In other words, Walsh believed that although the decimation of innocent Russian civilians would be, in his own words, “a regrettable effect,” the United States should nevertheless attack Russia to curb its influence. Although one might dismiss the aforementioned priest and his views on atomic warfare as isolated, many religious leaders—including Fulton J. Sheen, who had characterized the bomb as immoral in 1946—felt an, “… increasing inclination to defend the moral legitimacy, under certain circumstances, of using atomic bombs.” This dramatic change in priests’ stances on the atomic bomb from 1945 and 1946 to 1949 demonstrates that the Soviet’s first atomic test was a pivotal point in American Catholics’ opinion on the atomic bomb. Although the subject of nuclear weapons had once divided Catholics in the United States, such gaps increasingly narrowed down as the Cold War became entrenched internationally.

V. Conclusion

By closely examining different historical records one can conclude that the American Catholic community held a multitude of positions on the atomic bomb in 1945 and 1946 and did not develop a broad consensus of either a pro-bomb or anti-Communism position until the Soviet Union tested their first atomic weapon in 1949. Although the time frame here is limited in the sense that it only focuses on three, not necessarily consecutive years, it nevertheless demonstrates how the interplay of local and international factors affected the relationship between Catholicism and American politics in the mid-twentieth century. Perhaps more importantly, the evolution American Catholics’ opinions on nuclear weapons in the early atomic age is a necessary foundation in understanding the role assumed them in the Cold War. In the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, a large proportion of the Catholic community in the United States saw themselves as “crusaders of the Cold War” and enthusiastically took part in anti-Communist campaigns. American Catholics consistently supported anti-Communist measures more than any other religious group in the United States. The years between 1945 to 1949 are crucial because they serve as the forgotten origins of the relationship between American Catholicism and the anti-Communism, a marriage that would ultimately leave a complicated but indelible legacy in the remaining decades of the Cold War and beyond.