

THE CHRISTIAN FLAG  
by Dr. Whitney Smith

Although there may have been some usage of flags in or on American churches prior to 1861, it was the outbreak of the Civil War that year which first gave prominence to the custom. The Southern attack on the United States flag at Fort Sumter brought an immediate and overwhelming response throughout the North in favor of preservation of the Union and the flag symbolizing it. The call of the Reverend E. A. Anderson<sup>1</sup> - "let the flag of our country wave from the spire of every church in the land, with nothing above it but the cross of Christ" - was taken literally. Sermons were preached and public gatherings held in churches of all denominations throughout the North. The words of Edward Everett (a leading professor, statesman, and orator) were echoed by many others when he asked:<sup>2</sup>

Why is it that the flag of the country, always honored, always beloved, is now at once worshipped, I may say, with the passionate homage of this whole people? Why does it float, as never before, not merely from arsenal and masthead, but from tower and steeple... ? Let Fort Sumter give the answer.

The Stars and Stripes quickly came to be looked at as the symbol of a holy cause and even church leaders did not hesitate to associate divine approbation with the political and military objectives of the Union.<sup>3</sup> That association, moreover, diminished but did not cease at the end of the war; indeed it is still strong today. Some authors have not hesitated to attribute the destiny of the Stars and Stripes and even its design to God.<sup>4</sup>

The movement to make the American flag a permanent part of church decoration was encouraged by men like the Reverend George W. Gue, pastor of the First Methodist Episcopal Church of Rock Island, Illinois, a chaplain in the Grand Army of the Republic (the leading Union veterans' organization). He induced the Central Illinois Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church to pass a resolution on 30 September 1889, stating "that we, as a conference, do recommend that the American flag be placed in our churches and Sunday-schools as an emblem of our Christian civilization."<sup>5</sup> The Reverend Augustus E. Barnett of the Reformed Episcopal Church of Our Redeemer, Philadelphia, fostered the placement of flags in churches after he discovered that the custom was already widespread in the Western part of the country.<sup>6</sup> The poem "Our Country's Flag on God's Sacred Altars" by J. W. Temple urged "where altars to our Maker rise, there let His standards greet the skies."<sup>7</sup> He was referring both to the national flag of the United States and to "the banners of Our Lord, the King!" Since at that time there was no recognized flag representing Christianity or the church (let alone God), it was the Stars and Stripes alone which found its way into thousands of American churches (Fig. 1). While there were gonfalons and flags of a religious nature in American churches, generally they were limited to specific activities or served simply as decoration. Typical of the former are those shown in Fig. 28 and Fig. 3.9 Flags were also used by two organizations of young Christian activists - the Young People's Society of Christian Endeavor (Fig. 4), founded in Portland (Maine) in 1881, and the Epworth League (Fig. 5), established by Methodists at Cleveland (Ohio) in 1889. These and similar flags were associated with the organizations, rather than with Christianity in general.

A more general design, known as the Christian Conquest Flag, was "an emblem of the spirit of world-conquest for Christ."<sup>10</sup> This flag (Fig. 6) was blue and bore the Constantinian inscription BY THIS SIGN CONQUER in white; its square white canton displayed a red Latin cross. The paucity of available evidencell makes it impossible to determine if this flag preceded the Christian Flag, was developed later as an alternative to it, or was simply created independently at roughly the same time for parallel purposes.<sup>12</sup> The two flags are remarkably similar, differing only in the reversal of the white and blue areas and the addition to the Christian Conquest Flag of its bellicose slogan.<sup>13</sup>

#### ORIGINS AND DESIGN

The origin of the Christian Flag is given in two somewhat different forms, neither of which is adequately documented.<sup>14</sup> Both stories agree that the concept is attributable to Charles Carlton Overton (Fig. 8), a Sunday-school superintendent working at Brighton Chapel, Coney Island, New York. The circumstances cited by the articles, however, are quite different. According to the "traditional story," the expected speaker for that Rally Day, 26 September 1897, did not arrive and Overton extemporized as a substitute for him:<sup>15</sup> "Having no special subject in

mind, on which to speak, he took for his text a piece of cloth that had caught his eye as it laid draped over a corner of the pulpit: The American Flag." Given the extensive use of the United States<sup>16</sup> flag in churches in that era, such an act is credible, but the story next seems to hint at supernatural intervention:<sup>17</sup> "As [Overton] filled in the time, the thought like a vision came to him of a Christian Flag. He saw it clearly and described to his hearers its design and colors." Overton is said to have asked:<sup>18</sup>

Why... should there not be a flag for our Sunday-schools and churches, just as there was an American Flag for our country?... Before his talk to the audience was finished, he had outlined for them (and himself) a practical plan for such a Christian Flag; one not to be restricted by any geographical boundaries, but to remind all men of all nationalities of their allegiance to God, just as the national flag reminds them of their allegiance to their country and countrymen.

If the contemporary "first clipping" is to be believed, the inspiration which Overton received was actually directly related to a mundane incident he had witnessed. The author of the clipping noted:

The idea of a Christian Flag occurred to Mr. Overton on last Children's Day.<sup>19</sup> Each scholar [i.e. child] was furnished with a small American flag, and a parade was inaugurated. A few hours later a convention of liquor dealers was marched over the same ground, and by a strange coincidence each man carried an American flag of exactly the same size as those which the Sunday school children had carried.

In speaking of the occurrence, Mr. Overton said he was at once struck by the thought that a distinctive emblem was needed which might be symbolic of Christianity. And in this he meant no disrespect to the American flag. It was simply that the Stars and Stripes are too far reaching.

The clipping goes on to outline Overton's extensive promotional activity on behalf of the new Christian Flag – the manufacture of a great number of lapel pins illustrating it, the formation of a Christian Flag Extension Society to promote its use, the mailing of a brochure to superintendents of Sunday-schools, and the distribution of Crosby and Huntington's hymn to the flag to "band masters all over the country, with a request that the music be arranged as a march and played upon appropriate occasions." We are also told that "The owners of several large excursion steamers have ordered the Christian Flag for their vessels, to be flaunted to the breeze when carrying Sunday school excursions." The traditional story claims that Overton immediately had a sample flag made "and, on the very next Sunday, proudly saw it draped over the other corner of the pulpit beside the American Flag."<sup>20</sup> The explanation of the symbolism in the first clipping, apparently based on an interview with Overton, provides attributions for the three colors of the flag:

The ground is white, representing peace, purity and innocence. In one of the upper corners is a square of blue, the color of the unclouded sky, a symbol of faith and trust. In the centre of the blue is a cross, the chosen symbol of Christianity, the color being red, typical of Christ's blood.

Other sources give basically the same interpretation, although one<sup>21</sup> says that blue is for "fidelity and truth" and refers to the red cross as "the universal emblem of Christian sacrifice and service." Another source indicates that white is for the "sinlessness of the Founder of the faith, and man's joy in contemplating God's initiative in redeeming the world."<sup>22</sup> A South African who received a Christian Flag from an American friend was told<sup>23</sup> that the red indicated that "Christ is the only way to heaven," the blue corner "symbolizes heaven," the white background "the purity of Jesus Christ," and the gold fringe on the flag "the new Jerusalem."

What none of the sources mention, but which is evident from contrasting the designs of the Christian Flag and the Christian Crusade Flag with almost all other religious flags in the United States and elsewhere, is the close relationship the Christian Flag bears to the Stars and Stripes. Unconsciously or intentionally, Overton seems to have taken his cues from the Stars and Stripes for the field-and-canton arrangement,<sup>24</sup> the positioning of the most important symbol in the canton, the implicit contravention of both history and heraldry in the red cross being

placed on the blue of the canton, the exact correspondence of the three colors in both flags, and the general usage which the Christian Flag came to be accorded. The white field corresponds to a number of other parallel flags – the white flags of peace<sup>25</sup> and of temperance,<sup>26</sup> the Banner of Victory, the flag of the Red Cross movement,<sup>27</sup> and various religious flags.<sup>28</sup> In most of these it had been traditional to represent the cross (if shown) directly on a white background to provide a striking contrast for its red color. Whether Overton plagiarized his design from the Christian Crusade Flag (which has its red cross on a white canton) or whether he was first and the designer of the Christian Crusade Flag only improved his pattern, the inspiration for the design seems clearly to have been the United States flag.

The proximity of the Christian Flag to the United States flag in meaning, usage, and design is further reflected in literature. For example, Julia S. Tutwiler in 1911 wrote an alternative to "The Star-Spangled Banner" (then already unofficially acknowledged as the American national anthem) which she, like many others, felt was too militaristic in its wording. The third stanza of her "The Star-Spangled Banner of Peace" reads:<sup>29</sup>

Let our banner be Thine, Prince of Peace and of Love;  
On its staff for the eagle Thy baptismal dove;  
Let the stars in its folds but betoken the one  
That once led the wisemen to the cradle, Thy throne.  
And the stripes of bright crimson declare Thou has bled  
That man's blood nevermore by man's hand shall be shed;  
Then the star-spangled banner in triumph shall wave  
O'er a nation – Thy freemen – for righteousness brave!

#### ALTERNATIVE CHRISTIAN FLAGS

Despite its widespread use, the Christian Flag has never achieved official recognition and therefore, not surprisingly, is subject to some variations in the size of the cross and its components, as well as the shape and size of the canton. In the illustration on the first clipping, the canton is approximately square, each side corresponding to one-half the width of the flag with the cross height (Fig. 9) approximately four-fifths the width of the square. The width to length ratio of the flag seems to be approximately 2:3. Alternative flags have been suggested to replace the Christian Flag, although all have been of extremely limited usage. None, so far as is known, has ever been offered as a stock item by flag manufacturers, while the Christian Flag not only appears in their catalogs but is featured in separate sales brochures. One of the alternatives was developed by Charles Albert Gearing in 1932 because<sup>30</sup>

the old so-called Christian Flag... was copied from the American Flag in 1897 by leaving off the red stripes and replacing the 48 [sic] stars with a small cross... it did not have genuine Christian origin and does not enhance THE BEAUTY AND HONOR AND MAJESTY AND HOLINESS OF CHRIST'S HEAVENLY GLORY!

Gearing's Universal Christian Flag (Fig. 10) is divided vertically dark blue and white and has a horizontal stripe of purple and another of green running from hoist to fly. Twelve yellow stars are emblazoned on the white, while a yellow-bordered red cross is superimposed near the hoist on the stripes and the blue background. This cross bears a smaller green cross with a purple disk, which (like the other design elements) has specific symbolic meanings. A somewhat similar flag (Fig. 11), designed in 1984 by Ken Oglesby,<sup>31</sup> consists of seven equal horizontal stripes and, at the hoist, a cross extending from top to bottom and touching the heading. The colors of this "Christian Battle Flag" are not known. Still another flag (Fig. 12) from the same era – the Atomic Christians' Flag – was used by born-again pro-nuclear Christians in the Seattle (Washington) area. It adds a stylized nuclear symbol in dark blue to the center of the white field of the normal Christian Flag.<sup>32</sup>

A flag designed in 1975 to replace the Christian Flag featured a yellow-bordered red cross in the center of a dark blue field, the cross being surrounded by eight rays of white. Michael Webster, the designer,<sup>33</sup> explained:

Red is for the precious blood of Christ and our atonement, white for his love and mercy, blue for the everlasting faith of the fundamental Christian and gold for the gates of heaven. The light colored rays extending into a dark field represents [sic] the light of Christ shining through us in a sinful world.

Webster denounced the usual Christian Flag as a symbol of "all the modernism, worldliness, and formalism found in today's churches.... 'Just another religion' instead of God's doctrine, and truth."

The Christian Flag as used in churches is frequently decorated to match the United States flag: that is, it has gold fringe and gold cords and tassels are attached to the staff. The cord and tassels are shown in the first clipping version of the flag, but not the fringe; the flag has a ball finial. Modern usage favors a spearhead finial for the staff or some version of the cross. Nevertheless the first clipping has Overton recommending "that upon the standard [i.e. staff] that carries the flag a crown might replace the eagle and spear, [the crown being] emblematic of the reward awaiting the faithful."

In 1887 the Sacred Congregation of Rites stated that it was not lawful to admit any but religious flags and banners for which the formula of blessing is given in the Roman Ritual.... In the same year also a decree of the Inquisition stated that national flags that do not bear any forbidden emblem could be tolerated at funerals, provided they were carried after the coffin, but were not to be tolerated in the church unless their exclusion would lead to serious disturbances.

This rule was later modified,<sup>36</sup> but there is still resistance to the display of any national flag within a Catholic church, particularly on a permanent basis, precisely because of the questions it raises of etiquette when displayed together with the flag of Vatican City and, more generally, the relationship between a spiritual institution and the secular state within which it operates.<sup>37</sup>

The Christian Flag Code is based on the guiding principle that the Christian Flag should always be in the position of highest honor and respect, either to the flag's own right (i.e. observer's left; Fig. 13) of all other flags or in a position higher than those flags. This is true whether the Christian Flag is within a church or outside it - for example, in a parade or as displayed on a freestanding pole. Pollock, basing his code on the principle "Christ Above All," specifically cited two arguments in favor of that approach:<sup>38</sup>

All the laws of heraldry, social usage, and even the Apostles' Creed which places the Son at the right hand of God are explicit in designating the right hand side of reference as the place of highest honor.

...The banner [i.e. religious services pennant] symbolizing the worship of the Divine Being is hoisted on the same mast above the national symbol [i.e., the Stars and Stripes] during worship aboard ship. The U.S. Navy symbolically portrays this to be a "nation under God". Christian churchmen and church women will not do less.

The argument has also been advanced that the supremacy of the Christian Flag over the Stars and Stripes is required by the struggle against Communism which, at least during the Cold War, Americans were constantly urged to support. Pollock states<sup>39</sup>

The fact is that we are not an atheist country... We are reared in a spiritual tradition. Any one who objects to giving primary allegiance to God is unwittingly following the atheist position of the Communists rather than the American tradition of believers... men and women have died by execution rather than put even a pinch of incense on the flame to Caesar or perform any other act however trivial which could be interpreted as a denial of Christ.

Others have picked up this theme:<sup>40</sup>

Russia would like to fly the communist flag over the whole world. Its leaders in 1960-61 boasted that the total victory of communism is not far off. They feel we will give in and that the American people will hoist the red flag themselves. Let us stop this idea. Christians[,] show them where you stand. Fly the Christian Flag.... Since we fly the flag of the United States to remind us of our national heritage and the blessings we receive as citizens of the United States so should we fly the Christian flag to remind us and all who see it flying of the blessings of our Christian heritage.

Even a commercial sales brochure exhorts:<sup>41</sup>

There is an especial fitness for the presence of the Christian Flag in the churches and Sunday-schools of America in these trying times of cold war and international unrest. In an age replete with words like missile, anti-missile, megaton bomb, and the like, the Christian Flag remains a bulwark for peace, bearing no symbol of war or conquest or oppression. A flag standing for no creed or denomination, but for Christianity and love. A banner of the Prince of Peace, and the Christian patriot who salutes it pledges his allegiance to the Kingdom of God.

The Christian Flag Code was submitted by Pollock to the Michigan Annual Conference of the Methodist Church in 1941. It was subsequently endorsed that year and the next by other Methodist conferences and by the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. The Executive Committee of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. in January 1942 adopted a resolution stating in part:<sup>42</sup>

1) The Cross itself is generally accepted as a good and sufficient symbol for the house of God in the Christian tradition, without the use of a church flag.

2) If a flag or banner representing the loyalty of the church to its Head is used along with the flag of the nation in the sanctuary, the symbol of loyalty to God should have the place of highest honor.

Not all denominations agree with the conclusions drawn by Pollock, however. For example, one journal argued<sup>43</sup>

...there is no authorized church flag. The so-called Christian flags have no such authority.... A denomination can hardly issue instructions for the displaying of an emblem which it has not officially recognized. Of course there is no single organization in the United States which can make any emblem official for all the churches.... The reasonable thing to do, it seems to this journal, is to recognize the instructions issued by the war department [i.e. the rules, later made part of the Flag Code, giving the Stars and Stripes precedence over all other flags] and adjust the religious emblem to those orders. The religious enthusiast may feel that this is putting nation above God but he is handicapped in his effort to prove the authority of the emblem.

The journal continued to take that approach even after the 1942 recommendations of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.<sup>44</sup> Likewise the Vacation Bible School Plan Book,<sup>45</sup> both in its text and illustrations, gives the following ranking of precedence for ceremonies – the United States flag, the Christian Flag, and the Bible. The Plan Book notes that:

Beginning around 1905, and following the practice of public schools, VBS leaders began to use the American flag and pledge. Between 1918-1921, the Christian Flag and pledge were added. Around 1925, some denominations began to use the Bible in the processional and to write pledges to it. Holmer L. Grice began to recommend a pledge of allegiance to the Bible in 1925. The pledge,<sup>46</sup> as printed in VBS textbooks that year, has not been changed.

The concept of a "pledge of allegiance" to the Christian Flag and to the Bible are clearly derived from the similar ritual associated with the United States national flag, a ceremony widely known and practiced. The pledge to the Christian Flag was created in 1908 by Dr. Lynn Harold Hough, later dean of the Drew Theological Seminary.<sup>47</sup> At the time he was the pastor of the Third Methodist Episcopal Church in Long Island City, New York. During a Missionary Education Conference, Dr. Ralph E. Diffendorfer called for a pledge to the Christian Flag, since one was already being rendered to the Stars and Stripes. Responding, Hough proposed<sup>48</sup> "I pledge allegiance to my Flag and to the Savior for whose Kingdom it stands, one brotherhood, uniting all mankind in service and love." Variations to Hough's pledge subsequently arose. For example, "my Flag" was changed to "the Christian Flag" and some altered "uniting all mankind" to "uniting all Christians." Two totally different versions have also been published – "I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ and to the faith for which it stands – one Savior eternal, with mercy and grace for all" and "I affirm my loyalty to the Christian Flag and to our Saviour whose Cross it bears, One spiritual fellowship under that Cross uniting us in service and love." (It should be noted that the Pledge of Allegiance to the United States flag has also been altered officially – and unofficially – several times.)

4. See Scot M. Guenter, *The American Flag, 1777-1924: Cultural Shifts from Creation to Codification* (Rutherford NJ: Fairleigh Dickenson University Press, 1990), pp. 171-172. Many examples of God's involvement with the Stars and Stripes are given in *The Flower of Liberty* edited by Julia A. M. Furbish (Cincinnati: White, Corbin, Bouve, 1869). Among the poetic references are those by Orpheus C. Kerr (in his "Our Flag," p. 101) -

Flag of my country! Standard of the free  
In every land where dwelleth Liberty!...  
Charter of Hope by God to mortals given,  
Bright with the planetary pomp of heaven...

B. P. Shillaber ("The Flag," p. 84) refers to the flag as "a gleam of glory from above, a gonfalon of Paradise" and Kate Putnam ("Our Flag," p.48) writes:

Oh, symbol-hope of all the world!  
The pledge of Liberty!  
A stronger hand than ours unfurled  
Thy mighty prophecy.  
Let all thy starry splendors shine!  
Chime, bells, in sweet accord!  
Earth cannot harm that holy sign, -  
The banner of the Lord!

On a more mundane level Albert B. Moore is quoted on p. 735 of *History of Alabama and Her People, Vol. 1* (Chicago: American Historical Society, 1927), as asserting that "God would not have made our stars and stripes, nor would he have created man, if he had thought organized democracy was to make us tramps..."

5. George W. Gue, *Our Country's Flag* (Davenport, Iowa: Egbert, Fidler, and Chambers, 1890), p. 95.

6. "Stars and Stripes in Church," undated news clipping (circa 1897) in the files of the Flag Research Center.

7. Quoted on p. 93 of Gue.

8. Standard "Pattern A" among banners for Sunday-schools, produced by the William H. Horstmann Company (Philadelphia) as shown on p. 38 of their 1898 Catalogue of

9. Illustrated on p. 174 of the 1927 catalog of the Dettra Flag Company (Oaks, Pennsylvania).

10. Postcard text accompanying the reproduction of a 1910 painting by William T. Ellis entitled *The Twentieth Century Sunday School Crusaders* (Philadelphia: Sunday School Times, 1910). The flag is in gonfalon format but of the same design as the one described in the main text. It is accompanied by the national flags of Canada, Germany, France, Sweden-Norway, Japan, the United States, and Russia.

11. The only reference the author has been able to find to this flag is listings in flag manufacturers' catalogs, but these are often undated and in any event are too few to be able to establish the earliest and latest dates of usage of the flag.

12. The earliest references in manufacturers' listings to both flags, as uncovered by the author, are in the 1907 catalog of Annin and Company (New York), pp. 57 and 58.

13. The same slogan in Latin (*In Hoc Signo Vincas*) was previously inscribed on flags used by Masonic organizations, e.g. the Knights Templars' flag (Fig. 7) illustrated *inter alia* on p. 16 of the 1895 catalog of the American Flag Company (New York).

14. The best known story seems to have been written up first in the editorial "The Christian Flag" in *World Outlook*, Vol. XXXII, No. 7 (July 1942), p. 3, published in New York City by the Methodist Church. The alternative account appears in an undated news clipping in the files of the Flag Research Center entitled "The Christian Flag: A Symbolic Emblem..." (hereafter referred to as the first clipping). The clipping appears in the album *American Flag* collected by E. A. Houseman in the 1890s and the first decade of the 20th century. The unsigned article states that the flag was conceived "on last Children's Day," suggesting that it was published no more than a year after the flag was designed. On the other hand the article refers to the organization of a "Christian Flag Extension Society" which was promoting the flag and a hymn entitled "The Christian Flag" with music by R. Huntington Woodman and words by Fanny J. Crosby. The existence

- of the society and hymn suggests that the article was not written immediately after the conception of the flag.
15. The Christian Flag: Its Origin and Meaning (New York: Annin and Company, n.d.), unpagged. This brochure was issued by the company which claims to have made the first copy of the Christian Flag.
  16. An undated postcard in the collection of Kevin Harrington, whose text and illustration refer to Rally Day, shows two school-age girls marching from home to church with a large United States flag.
  17. James R. Pollock, The Christian Flag Code: Christ above All: Our Christian Flag, How to Honor and Display It. This undated brochure, evidently post-1981, was published by the author.
  18. The Christian Flag: Its Origin and Meaning.
  19. There is an apparent discrepancy of date, since Children's Day was usually observed by Protestant churches on the second Sunday in June - not in late September, which other sources attribute as the date of the flag's conception.
  20. The Christian Flag: Its Origin and Meaning. Another source, The Vacation Bible School Plan Book (Nashville, Tennessee: Sunday-School Board, Southern Baptist Convention, 1993), p. 32, states that "the Christian Flag was displayed first on October 5, 1897." If its conception was on Sunday, 26 September, logically the flag should first have been displayed the following Sunday, 3 October.
  21. World Outlook.
  22. Frederich Rest, Our Christian Symbols (Philadelphia: Christian Education Press, 1954). The same author also indicates that blue symbolizes sincerity, also mentioned in the Vacation Bible School Plan Book.
  23. As related in a letter from Pieter Kruger to the Flag Research Center dated 9 November 1991.
  24. Concerning this vexillographic theme, see Howard Millar Chapin, The Artistic Motives in the United States Flag (Providence: Pavillon Club, 1930).
  25. See Whitney Smith, "Symbols of Peace and Pacifism: The Dove, Olive Branch, and White Flag," THE FLAG BULLETIN, Vol. XX, No. 1, pp. 11-22.
  26. See "Adresse de la World's Women's Christian Temperance Union," Bulletin Officiel du VIIe Congrès Universel de la Paix... (Berne: Bureau International de la Paix, 1896), p. 114.
  27. See Peter Macalister-Smith, "Symbols of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement," THE FLAG BULLETIN, No. 122, pp. 223-233.
  28. Among the examples that might have been familiar in the late 19th century were the white flags of the Pontifical States, the white flag with a purple cross used by the Evangelical Church in Germany, and the many white gonfalons with emblems painted or embroidered on them which were used in American churches.
  29. Journal of Education, 13 April 1911, pp. 402-403.
  30. Charles Albert Gearing, The World God's Creation... (Bellwood IL: the author, 1975), p. 11.
  31. The only available information is the sheet Christian Battle Flag issued by Flag World of Springfield, Illinois.
  32. Letter and photograph in the files of the Flag Research Center, received circa 1985 from The Flag Store in San Francisco.
  33. The creator of the flag provided an explanatory sheet entitled "Why Fly the Flag of Liberals" to the Flag Research Center on 11 April 1975, followed on 27 February 1976 with a color photograph of the flag which had been officially adopted by the College Park [North Carolina] Baptist Church.
  34. James R. Pollock, The Christian Flag Code: Christ above All (Bradenton FL: the author, 1981) and James R. Pollock, The Christian Flag Code: Christ above All: Our Christian Flag, How to Honor and Display It.
  35. "Flags and Banners - May They Be Admitted into the Church and Blessed?" Irish Ecclesiastical Record, Vol. 37 (June 1931), pp. 637-638.
  36. See William Becker, "Vatican Flags," THE FLAG BULLETIN, No. 119, endnote 16 (pp. 234-236).
  37. John P. Bolen, "Flags inside the Church," The Ecclesiastical Review, Vol. CIX (August 1943), pp. 116-124.
  38. The first appears on p. 3 of The Christian Flag Code: Christ above All; the other appears under the heading "Flag Placement" in the post-1981 brochure.
  39. The Christian Flag Code: Christ above All, p. 4.
  40. William Elliott, Witness with a Flag (Lakewood CA: the author, n.d.).
  41. The Christian Flag: Its Origin and Meaning.
  42. The Christian Flag Code: Christ above All, p. 6.
  43. "The Display of Christian and National Flags," Church Management, June 1941, pp. 574-575.
  44. "State and Church Flags," Church Management, July 1942, pp. 57-58.

45. Op. cit., pp. 32-34.

46. "I pledge allegiance to the Bible, God's Holy Word, a 'lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.' Its words will I hide in my heart that I may not sin against God.".....

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.....ůThe words of the Christian Flag pledge were set to music by Harry M. Staton in a song copyright in 1911, "The Salute of the Christian Flag." The hymn to the flag written by Fanny Crosby, "The Christian Flag," has already been mentioned (note 14). The Vacation Bible School Plan Book sets forth a joint service for students and adults in which the United States flag, the Christian Flag, the Bible, and the pledges to each are prominently featured with instructions for all participants. Church Management<sup>49</sup> has presented ceremonies for dedicating the Christian Flag and/or a church flagstaff and, during World War I, Homer A. Rodeheaver's Building of the Flag, or Liberty Triumphant celebrated both the Stars and Stripes and the Christian Flag - the latter to be "a trifle higher than the U.S. flag."<sup>50</sup>

#### THE FLAG IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

America's "Christian Flag" is an extraordinary invention. For the first 18 centuries of its existence, Christianity had no flag which represented it universally. There were, of course, Christian symbols: the most prominent one, the cross, appeared on many Christian flags. A special battle flag was often given by a pope to a secular ruler who, in undertaking a military campaign, wished to show his followers (and his enemies) that divine favor backed his efforts. The cross flag of William the Conqueror is only one of many examples. There was no standard pattern, however, and certainly this type of flag cannot be considered representative of Christianity as a religion. Likewise the "Banner of Victory" held by Christ in many artistic representations of the Resurrection - usually depicted as a red cross on a white swallowtailed field - was widely recognized as being associated with the overcoming of death, rather than with religious activities and the infrastructure of the church. The red flag of the papacy with its golden crossed keys represented the secular power of the popes despite its religious symbolism.

Given this background, it is appropriate to ask - in seeking to understand the development of the Christian Flag - what social milieu could after so many centuries produce both the concept and need for the first "Christian flag" as well as the favorable response which that flag found after its invention in 1897. It is no accident that this Christian Flag was developed in the United States and that to that this day it continues to be more extensively used in that country than elsewhere. Of great significance in this connection is the strong religious fervor of a high percentage of the American population. Many, especially in certain eras, have not been content simply to follow the religious beliefs of traditional church leaders but have given concrete expression to strong evangelical impulses. Conversion of heathens and reform of backsliders, both at home and abroad, constituted a modern populist crusade throughout 19th century America, while 20th century manifestations of the same spirit have also been frequent and intense.

Americans of the past century were not ignorant of other religions. The diversity of beliefs within the United States, particularly in contrast with other countries, made it certain that few Americans were unacquainted with a variety of Protestant denominations, Roman Catholicism, Mormonism, Judaism, and even the "heathenish" religions of immigrants from China and Africa. Ralph Waldo Emerson and others introduced the United States to Hinduism, while later in the century Colonel Henry Steel Olcott (and others) promoted Buddhism. The result was that most Americans were well aware of the internal and external challenges to "true Christianity," however a given individual and his church might define that. Catholic Spain or Lutheran Sweden might have no need for a Christian flag, but Christians in America (or at least in many of its Protestant churches) acted as if they were in a constant battle for the faith.

Similar all-encompassing movements of a secular nature also existed in the late 19th century United States. "Manifest Destiny" was more than a vague phrase: it was seen as a promise that God had marked the United States for a special leading role in world history. The transcontinental railroad, the growing industrial growth of the country, the overwhelming defeat of a major European power in a ridiculously brief war (Spain in 1898), the progress of science - not to mention the binding up of national wounds following the devastation of its Civil War -



gave the United States a feeling of indomitability at the end of the 19th century. Many Americans wanted to share their self-defined superior civilization not only with the "benighted peoples" of the Philippines and Puerto Rico, but as well with those "more enlightened" Europeans who still had not shaken off the last vestiges of the Middle Ages.

Therefore it is not surprising to find in that era worldwide movements – including prison reform, child labor laws, and extension of the ballot – begun in America with the object of overcoming fundamental social problems. A number of these movements were represented by special flags – the plain white flag of the temperance movement (under the leadership of the Women's Christian Temperance Union); the tricolor flag of arbitration;<sup>51</sup> the national-flag-within-a-white-border of the peace movement; the Bethel Flag for shipboard prayers;<sup>52</sup> and the first proposals for a world unity flag. There were also intimations that the United States would welcome adding stars to its national flag and sharing its advancements, real and imagined, by the admission of independent nations to the Union as new states. It is in this context – a self-confident nation which sought to cure all social ills by marching, literally or figuratively, under banners of reform – that the creation of the Christian Flag must be understood.

#### NOTES

1. Cited by George Henry Preble, *History of the Flag of the United States of America...* (Boston: A. Williams, 1880), p. 452.
2. *Ibid*, p. 459; emphasis added. Information on flag raisings on churches is found on pp. 457-459 of the same book.
3. The same spirit has been evident in subsequent wars; see, for example, *THE FLAG BULLETIN*, No. 140, pp. 46-

#### PROTOCOL OF THE CHRISTIAN FLAG

The Christian Flag Code<sup>34</sup> does not discuss the appropriate finial for the flag, nor does it mention cords and tassels or fringe. Indeed the sole concern of its drafter, the Reverend James R. Pollock, was to alter the Flag Code adopted by the United States Congress in 1942 which – although it has no force of law – is universally recognized as the basic guideline for appropriate flag display in the country. The Christian Flag Code gives priority to the Christian Flag over the Stars and Stripes or any other flag with which it is displayed. The question of precedence arises, of course, because of the prominence of the national flag in American churches, a situation which never occurs in many countries. In the Roman Catholic faith there has long been general resistance to the idea of allowing any but sacred flags within churches:<sup>35</sup>

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