Christianity With Its Sleeves Rolled Up: Business and the Post-War Industrial Chaplain Movement
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For three years beginning in 1948, the AFL’s Stove Mounters waged a sustained campaign to organize the Dearborn Stove Company of Dallas, Texas. A series of certification elections testified to the union’s slow but steady progress towards winning the workers’ allegiance; in the 1950 election, management prevailed by just a single vote. As it wrestled with the union, company officials became convinced that the workers’ discontent was unrelated to wages, benefits or working conditions, but was nurtured by the firm’s failure to satisfy its employees’ non-economic needs. Casting about for a means to improve labor-management relations, the Dearborn Stove Company turned to religion. In February 1951, the company hired J. Gordon Peterson to serve as the firm’s industrial chaplain. An ordained Protestant clergyman, Peterson attended to the workers’ spiritual and psychological needs, serving both as a minister and personal counselor.¹

Peterson’s typical day began by leading devotional services on the shop floor. Employees met for ten minutes of worship consisting of a prayer, the reading and discussion of a Biblical passage, and closing with the chaplain intoning “God bless you, today,” after which the production wheels began turning. During the rest of the day, Peterson circulated through the plant, talking informally with the employees or offering counseling and private prayer sessions with
workers struggling with problems ranging from alcoholism and domestic difficulties to annoying foremen or coworkers.²

The company’s investment in improved human relations appeared to pay off. In 1952, a year into Peterson’s industrial ministry, the NLRB held yet another election. This time management rejoiced when it won a resounding two to one victory against the union. Three years after hiring their industrial chaplain, the company’s vice president of production happily reported that the results of the program “have been excellent, from both a spiritual and an economic point of view.”³ The Dearborn Company was one of dozens of companies in the decade after World War II that hired Protestant ministers to care for the spiritual needs of their workers. Moreover, a widespread interest in industrial chaplains among both church and industry groups made the prospects for its further growth promising.⁴

From the vantage of the early twenty-first century, this movement appears to have fulfilled expectations. Historian Chad Seales cites just a few examples: in 2010, Tyson Foods, which defines itself as a “faith-friendly company” that strives to “honor God,” was employing 120 part-time chaplains in seventy-seven production facilities. One firm whose business is to supply company chaplains, the Dallas-based Marketplace Chaplains (created in 1984) has supplied 2,482 chaplains to companies employing over 500,000 workers in 850 cities.⁵ But the progress was neither rapid nor linear. In fact, struggles between church, business,
and labor visions during the first decade of industrial chaplain movement nearly eliminated the phenomenon and resulted in a far more constrained movement.

The initial industrial chaplain programs were examples of a spiritual turn that employers and business leaders took during a particularly tumultuous time in the history of American capitalism. Other scholars – Bethany Moreton, Darren Dochuk, Kimberly Phillips-Fein – have noted the ways that businessmen turned to religion, especially evangelical Protestantism, to promote their visions of an individualistic, free-enterprise capitalism and an anti-statist political culture. But this literature slights the fact that many employers also envisioned a role for clergy on the shop floor. Although using religion in the workplace had a long history associated with paternalism of the nineteenth century and welfare capitalism of the early twentieth century, the idea for “ministers with their sleeves rolled up” emerged amid the conflicts generated by the enormous dislocations of wartime production. Inspired by wartime military chaplains, some churches and employers set up several experimental chaplaincies.

Perceptive postwar employers quickly recognized the untapped potential of using clergy to quell the unrest from workforces that had rising expectations stoked by union promises. Wartime mobilization had a profound impact on industrial relations. While clergy worried about the effect of the war on their relations with the working class, employers feared losing control of the shop floor. Millions of
new workers had surged into unions and an emboldened, more powerful labor movement threatened precious managerial rights. Postwar plans for organizing drives in regions lightly touched by organized labor, especially the South, posed yet another challenge to a nervous business community.⁹

Employers who hoped to exploit the promise of industrial chaplains to recapture workplace control after World War II, however, discovered a range of factors that complicated their goals. First, the churches most likely to supply chaplains, Protestant ones, were in turmoil as a resurgent fundamentalism challenged the social programs of mainline denominations. New conservative evangelical associations emerged to contest the liberal theology of the Federal Council of Churches. Second, debates raged over the objectives of industrial chaplains. Was their primary purpose to Christianize workers, or were they to be counselors promoting a therapeutic brand of religion that complemented new human relations strategies and the insights gained from industrial psychology?¹⁰

Finally, industrial chaplains confronted the various cultures of the workers. Some workers were skeptical of the moralizing sentiments of workplace religion, particularly when it conflicted with or undermined their own beliefs. But especially in unionized or unionizing workplaces, workers were deeply suspicious of industrial chaplains who appeared to be doing the bidding of the company.
This paper surveys the origins and goals of industrial chaplains during World War II as well as the limitations of the idea amid the contentious industrial relations climate of the post-war decade.

The connection between religion and the workplace has deep roots. In the early nineteenth century, recognizing that Calvinist virtues of industry and frugality meshed well with efforts to instill discipline in a new factory workforce, New England textile mill owners built churches close to their factories and encouraged religiousity. Later in the century, leading capitalists, helped spread the message to workers that Christian piety and individual self-help were the solution to society’s economic and social problems. As the textile industry moved South, newly-built mill villages commonly featured company-owned churches, served by ministers recruited and subsidized by paternalistic mill owners. These ministers helped forge labor discipline by providing moral supervision of employees and by preaching the gospel of “temperance, frugality, honesty, discipline, loyalty (to the company), and independence (from unions).” 11 Such manifestations of employer-sanctioned shop floor religion, however, diminished after the twenties. As I have already mentioned, World War II brought new business and church experiments linking the workplace to religion.
In the immediate aftermath of the war and with the end of cost-plus contracts, most of these experimental industrial chaplaincies ended, but the religious community and employers remained intrigued with the concept. From the outset, liberal and conservative Protestants envisioned different models of industrial chaplaincy. Liberals associated with the Federal Council of Churches supported social action and organized labor. They favored modernist theological trends and ecumenicalism that many conservative clergy found disconcerting. On the other side, a resurgent fundamentalism, which exerted influence in a number of denominations, especially in the South, stressed that the church’s primary goals should be the promotion of piety, personal salvation, and individual morality and viewed unions with suspicion if not hostility. In 1943, religious conservatives formed their interdenominational association, the National Association of Evangelicals, to serve as an alternative voice for American Protestantism. Much of the business community supported the conservatives and dismissed the Federal Council vision as “socialistic.” One of the Liberals basic assumptions was that industrial chaplains should “clearly represent the church” and “avoid identification with either labor or management” to maintain their legitimacy. The Federal Council of Churches was highly critical of the industrial chaplaincy model being promoted by the conservative National Association of Evangelicals and by employers, charging that in their programs, chaplains worked exclusively for
management and generally represented a fundamentalist rather than progressive approach to religion. In fact, the NAE’s National Commission on Industrial Chaplaincies did have close ties to the business community.\textsuperscript{14}

In the decade after World War II, the Federal Council of Churches model of industrial chaplaincy made relatively little headway. The church generally found it difficult to gain the cooperation of labor and management.\textsuperscript{15} The employer’s vision of industrial chaplaincy though attracted a somewhat larger following. In 1954, Nation’s Business estimated that forty companies had hired clergy. At least fourteen companies employed ministers on a full-time basis, including R.J. Reynolds, Fieldcrest Mills, Texas Aluminum Company, Sunray Oil, Lone Star Steel, R.G. LeTourneau, and more retained chaplains on a part-time basis. A broad range of industries employed chaplains, including heavy equipment, steel, oil, textiles and tobacco. Most firms were non-union and the movement had a strongly Southern focus. In many ways this is not surprising given that the industrial chaplaincy was a Protestant phenomenon and that the South tended to be an overwhelmingly evangelical Protestant region.\textsuperscript{16}

Industrial chaplaincies were but one manifestation of religion in the workplace. Companies invested in religious literature and welcomed on-the-job religious services. In 1954, \textit{Nation’s Business} estimated that 800 firms disseminated religious literature among their workers. Many companies, including
industry leaders like U.S. Steel and General Motors, distributed *Guideposts*, Norman Vincent Peale’s inspirational monthly that mixed anti-communism, an emphasis on the benefits of individual initiative and free enterprise with “practical Christianity.”

Equally common were employer-sanctioned workplace prayer gatherings. In 1955, the *Christian Advocate*, observing that “prayer time on company time is coming into fashion in industries across the country,”

A complex mix of motives underscored the growth of this phenomenon. Certainly in part it was a reflection of the postwar religious revival. Contemporary observers found evidence of a “spiritual awakening” within the business community. In 1952, L. J. Fletcher, a Caterpillar Company Vice-President asserted that “there can be no doubt as to the growing appreciation on the part of industrial management of what might be called the spiritual values of life as they affect all phases of modern living.”

For some employers, then, strong religious convictions influenced their decision to hire an industrial chaplain or support other forms of workplace religion. The management of the John E. Mitchell Company of Dallas, which hired a chaplain in 1949, for instance, had an “intense desire” to see its employees brought “into the right relationship with God.”

Even the most religious employers realized there were tangible business benefits to religion in the workplace. Like their nineteenth century counterparts,
mid-twentieth century managers hoped that a pious, morally upright workforce would be more productive and loyal. Motivating and controlling their workers were long standing goals of employers. At the end of World War II, in the face of an aggressive labor movement, many managers felt increasingly insecure about their ability to achieve these goals.\textsuperscript{21}

The emphasis on religion at work dovetailed nicely with other postwar managerial initiatives, in particular, human relations. The human relations movement found a link between productivity and workers’ social and psychological satisfaction on the job. Human relations programs taught supervisors therapeutic skills—especially the importance of interacting with workers as individuals and meeting workers’ higher or non-economic needs.\textsuperscript{22}

Both of these strategies—human relations and industrial chaplaincy—sought to put management front and center in responding to workers’ needs. In some cases, employers hired clinical psychologists or instituted training programs to encourage foremen to give employees individual attention and to demonstrate the company’s interest by providing a sympathetic ear to workers’ problems.\textsuperscript{23}

Industrial chaplaincy, then, was in some respects a spiritually-motivated program linked to this effort to build and retain a productive and loyal workforce.\textsuperscript{24} In other cases, however, industrial chaplaincy was closely related to a more sophisticated anti-unionism. Like human relations, applied Christianity promised
not only to solve employees work problems and improve productivity, but also to build identification with the firm, and at the same time improve labor-management relations. 25

Industrial chaplain programs typically reflected the diverse and often mixed motives of employers. In some cases, the religious duties of the chaplain ranked behind other goals. At Fieldcrest Mills, for instance, chaplain J.K. McConnell did not pray with employees unless they specifically requested. Other chaplains were closely tied to the personnel department and actively promoted increased productivity. Tom Roth, chaplain for John E. Mitchell Company, on occasion even pitched in to help out a department lagging in production. Others emphasized their ministers independence from company hierarchy. Counseling of troubled workers was part of virtually every program, but again the extent of this activity varied. According to the Wall Street Journal, virtually all of the chaplains enjoyed the “wide respect generally accorded a man of the cloth.” This characteristic, “one that management is not unaware of,” separated the chaplain from other personnel workers; the “reservoir of goodwill very often” helped the “chaplain do things that other company men could not.” 26 A closer look at several industrial chaplaincies will shed light on the range of the experience.
The nation’s most acclaimed industrial chaplain, Clifford Peace, worked for the tobacco giant, R.J. Reynolds in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. In 1949, the company hired its industrial chaplain as an element of a broader effort to regain the loyalty of its workforce. Until 1943 Reynolds, had relied on welfare capitalism, repression, and racial divisions to control its workers. Then, in the midst of the wartime burst of labor activism, Local 22 of the Food, Tobacco, Agricultural and Allied Workers union won collective bargaining rights for the company’s ten thousand mostly black low-wage workers. Reynolds countered the union by exploiting the rising fear of communism and by seeking to intensify racial divisions within labor’s ranks. In 1948 it terminated its collective bargaining agreement with Local 22 and two years later, the company won a narrow victory over the union in a National Labor Relations Board election. Like other postwar employers, Reynolds looked to a revived welfare capitalism and human relations to win back its employees’ allegiance.27

Reynolds also turned to religion to help forge stronger bonds between the company and its employees. While human relations served as one way to provide for the intangible needs of workers, Company president John C. Whitaker believed that there were times when people needed “to be guided into right relations not only with themselves but with God.”28 In 1949, the company hired Clifford H. Peace, a forty-year-old Methodist minister as pastor-counselor of the
company. He came with strong qualifications. Peace was raised on a North Carolina tobacco farm, worked in the Durham tobacco industry to pay his way through college and Duke Divinity School, and served as a chaplain overseas in the Air Force.  

The company left Peace’s role largely up to him. The chaplain conceived of the position as “Christianity with its sleeves rolled up.” To build the employees’ trust, Peace began by spending much of the first year walking through R.J. Reynolds’ offices, factories and warehouses personally meeting all of the company’s 12,000 workers. Peace encountered troubled workers, like the “haggard youth” who confided: “I’m licked, Preacher, but don’t tell my foreman about it. I’m drunk every night of the week;” and a woman, barely holding back her tears, who whispered: “My boy’s in Korea . . . and I’m so sick with worry about him that I can’t do my work right.” Peace assured them that God could help solve their troubles and invited them to his office for longer talks.  

After meeting the workforce, Peace focused on counseling and over the next six years, provided services to one sixth of Reynolds’s employees. Counseling sessions occurred on company time and lasted about an hour with the usual case averaging seven or eight meetings. Peace dealt almost exclusively with personal problems using a combination of psychology, religious guidance, and prayer.
As historian Robert Korstad observed, Peace was “quite aware of the ambiguities of his position.” He knew that workers might “suspect him of being an ear of management.” If other chaplains unabashedly served the company’s interest, Peace emphasized his independence. He recounted that before taking the job he insisted on Reynolds’ assurance that he could “follow his conscience when counseling an employee.”

R.G. Reynolds publicly insisted that it had no ulterior motives in hiring an industrial chaplain. Indeed, Clifford Peace argued that companies should not hire chaplains just to boost productivity or as a substitute for fair labor-management polices; they should not attempt to “manipulate the power of religion for personal gain.” He did believe, however, that a “company which acts from religious motives . . . does reap a material reward as a by-product.” Within two years of his employment, labor turnover declined by one third, the accident rate dropped forty percent and absenteeism also declined. Reynolds also contended that the employee morale had improved so much that “old-timers say they actually ‘feel’ the difference when they walk through factories and offices.”

Other companies also found that they too received real payoffs from their investment in workplace religion, reporting that it directly aided morale. Industrial chaplains seemed particularly effective at demonstrating the company’s concern for its employees as individuals. Harold Young, a Fieldcrest Mills plant worker,
for instance stated: “Our Chaplaincy service makes us feel a part of the plant. By employing a chaplain we feel the company is interested in our personal welfare.”

Some companies pointed out that their chaplain’s work led to even more concrete results, including increased productivity.

This kind of boasting about the benefits of workplace religion aroused suspicions that companies were using piety as a tool to undercut organized labor. Union leaders like Victor Reuther of the UAW, John Ramsay of the CIO and O.A. Knight, of the Oil Workers International Union, among others, denounced the practice, pointing out that most chaplains served non-union firms. Labor found the basic premise of many industrial chaplaincies threatening. While unions sought collective means to address workers’ problems, many company chaplains “preached a gospel that downplayed group solidarity” and emphasized individual salvation. Indeed the *Winston-Salem Journal* praised R.J. Reynolds for hiring Clifford Peace, anticipating that he would help “restore a sense of a ‘community of interest’ to industrial relationships” and “demonstrate that ‘the world cannot be made right by organizations.’” In 1955, Knight observed that the industrial chaplain’s work at Sun Ray Oil had caused a “justifiable resentment against religion in the workplace” among oil workers. These workers, the vast majority of whom were "good Christians" according to Knight, viewed employer paid chaplains as nothing more than a “company stooge.”
Business employment of ministers also remained controversial within the Protestant church. Liberal Protestants welcomed innovative ways to reach the unchurched, but identified important flaws in the practice. In early 1954, Marshall L. Scott, dean of the Presbyterian Institute of Industrial Relations pointed out that management “no matter how zealous, cannot shove religion upon employees.” While he acknowledged that the “Christian concern of most management is genuine,” Scott warned that company-paid chaplains aroused suspicion “that religion is being used, consciously or unconsciously” to keep workers content and undermine organized labor.38

Indeed, the early postwar predictions that industrial chaplaincy would spread rapidly throughout American industry were not realized in the immediate postwar period. Faced with opposition from organized labor and elements of the church, it failed to expand much beyond the South. Marshal Scott found the question of who paid the salary of the industrial chaplain as insurmountable barrier to its growth. Other clerics dismissed the entire phenomena of religion in industry as lacking “genuine spiritual underpinnings. . . it was far too pragmatic, too ‘practical’” to “inspire real hope.”39

If the prognosis in the late fifties for the future of industrial chaplaincy seemed bleak, the last three decades have witnessed a resurgence in the movement as employers have rediscovered the benefits of faith-based workplace programs.
In 2006, for instance Tyson Foods employed 128 part-time chaplains in its plants and offices. Industry groups estimate that there are over 4,000 workplace chaplains, some of whom are provided by companies like Marketplace Ministries and Corporate Chaplains of America. They have buttressed a renewed effort on part of management to provide an alternative to unions in an unstable economic climate and perhaps have spread more broadly due to the lack of a strong labor movement to object.\textsuperscript{40}

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Endnotes


4 There was a tremendous amount of interest in industrial chaplaincy and religion in the workplace in the forties and fifties. During the late fifties and early sixties, in addition to numerous accounts in the media, it was the subject of a number of masters theses written mostly by divinity students. However, the movement has received little attention from historians although it is mentioned briefly in works by Elizabeth Fones-Wolf and Darren Dochuck, and Sarah Hammond’s dissertation discusses the National Association of Evangelicals effort to promote industrial chaplaincy after World War II. Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, \textit{Selling Free}

5 Seales, “Corporate Chaplaincy and the American Workplace


Carpenter, *Revive Us Again*, 144-52; Hammond, “God’s Business Men,” chp. 4..


Fones-Wolf, Selling Free Enterprise, pp. 73-86; Gillespie, Manufacturing Knowledge, p. 237; Jacoby, Modern Manors, pp. 127, 220-228.


Report to the Committee on Religion and Industry in Connection With the Annual Meeting of the Board of Managers of the United Church Men, St. Louis, Nov. 5-7, 1954, Box 27, Folder 1, RG 10, NCC; L. J. Fletcher to E. Urner Goodman, Oct. 30, 1953, Box 26, Folder 51, RG 10, NCC.


