The Christian century and the fluidity of American ideologies, 1919-1932

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THE CHRISTIAN CENTURY AND THE FLUIDITY OF AMERICAN IDEOLOGIES, 1919-1932

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PART ONE

INVENTING THE CHRIStIAN CENTURY

I. Providing Perspective

Very little in the issue of the Christian Century that was printed on November 6, 1929, distinguished it from those editions of the magazine that preceded it. As had been the case for the past decade, the subtitle “An Undenominational Journal of Religion” could be found on its masthead. Its editorial section, which as always occupied its opening pages, included columns on subjects that would have been quite familiar to the journal’s readers, namely prohibition and the antiwar movement. But a visually undistinguished detail separated the issue from any other in the Century’s forty-five year backlog. In a small, lucid editorial that encompassed only one paragraph, it was announced that “The Cold, Gray Dawn” had arrived:

Today, while bankers throw in their resources to rescue the market, and veterans on the inside prepare to pick up at bargain prices the stocks which a gullible public has been force to throw away, the process of a national sobering up is beginning. This is the cold, gray dawn of the morning after... But the episode may not be without its therapeutic value. 1

It was with these unremarkable words that the Christian Century greeted the first wave of the infamous stock market crash of 1929. In a five-week period that culminated on November 19th, the Dow Jones industrial average lost nearly fifty percent of its value. Numerous accounts of American history fix on the immense havoc and the disastrous implications that the crash had for the United States. But the Century had a different take on the event. It dedicated a single paragraph to these economic developments, briefly suggesting that the country might learn a lesson from its financial miscues, and then went...
about its normal business. As usual, in the November 6th issue editors had far more to say about the “evils attending intemperance” than most anything else, and even took the opportunity of the Wall Street fiasco to metaphorically allude to the benefits of sobriety.²

Was the battle against the rising tide of liquor more important to certain people of the 1920s than the monstrous market crash? This idea seems highly unlikely in the context of popular American historiography. Yet the musings of the *Century*, a journal which has been distinguished as one of the most intellectually influential of its time by both its defenders and critics, seems to attest to this very possibility. Much like its treatment of the many other pertinent issues facing the United States in the postwar era, the *Century*’s editorializing about the “great” crash challenges historical assumptions and deconstructs the routine categories normally assigned by historians to this complicated era in American history. The unique ability of the journal to impart its theologically flavored convictions about secular societal issues deserves a place in the body of American scholarly research. Given that the decade of the 1920s and the early depression years witnessed an unrivaled collision between competing trends of religious conservatism and secular modernism, it would be logical to conclude that an examination of the journal’s religious critique during this era would be particularly valuable. However, the study of the *Century* and its opinions has not attracted the systematic labor of American scholars. There is a scarcity of primary source research on the magazine, be it in the annals of religious, secular, or journalistic history.³

The study of the *Christian Century* from 1919-1932 straddles multiple bodies of historiography. In one respect, because the journal is devoted to the critique of societal problems, its belongs among the more traditional social and political histories that cover
the prominent people and events of its era. On the other hand, the journal is very much a part of the religious historiography. Any study of this era is obliged to begin with Fredrick Lewis Allen’s trendsetter, *Only Yesterday*. Published in 1931, though begun by the historian immediately following the 1929 stock market crash, Allen’s study of American society in the 1920s set the standard for historical interpretation of the period for decades to come. The era’s reputation as a socially carefree bubble in history that immediately ruptured when the stock market crashed can very much be attributed to Allen. Historian Burl Noggle argued that the work furthermore set a precedent for “decennary periodization” in historical research (a technique that has essentially been discounted in this study because it is far too arbitrary considering the subject material) where historians section off ten-year units that are believed to embody a certain prevailing character.\(^4\)

Nearly three decades after *Only Yesterday* had been welcomed with open arms by both the consumer public and scholars alike, Roger Butterfield asserted that no study of the twenties had “essentially changed the overall picture that Allen gave us.”\(^5\) The great majority of projects on the American 1920s inevitably begin with allusions to traditional notions about the era that emphasize popular fascination with jazz, speakeasies, and flappers, and other familiar cultural institutions of the time. These histories then claim that they will refute these historical myths. However, those same works, by their last pages having labored so mightily to redraw a conception of the ‘20s, often achieve little in terms of dispelling the very mythic context with which they began. Over time, a historical awareness of the complexity of the era rewarded the interwar years of 1919-1941 with the recognition it warrants: the status of the forebearer to a modernized United States, not completely detached from the Wilsonian progressive age nor from post-
depression events. Indeed this was not an “accidental pause in history,” as Elizabeth Stevenson tellingly characterizes the simplicity with which previous historiography had treated the ‘20s.6

The tradition of history galvanized by Allen is the foundational component of historical research on the interwar years. Still, the Christian Century of 1919-1932 equally belongs to the religious and, specifically, Protestant branch of historiography. A Religious History of the American People by Sydney Ahlstrom served as the culmination of religious historical writing rooted in institutional churches and official forms of theology. Ahlstrom is Allen’s counterpart as the grandfather of this historiographical tradition. His work covers an immense longitudinal section of religious America. The historian briefly reflects on the Century and its editor, Charles Clayton Morrison as “immeasurably” influential,7 though the relationship between religious and secular forces in society is clearly not at the heart of Ahlstrom’s study.

Just as forms of social history over time have been more readily accepted, so did the study of religious history begin to stray away from the church as the principal institution of inquiry. The advent of non-church based research allowed for the flowering of more focused forms of historical research. Projects pertaining to modern Protestantism such as Martin Marty’s Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America were the fruits of the changing currents within the genre. The “bipolar thesis” developed in the book greatly influenced historical theory on the topic of modern religion. Marty argued that a definitive ideological break occurred in Protestantism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that resulted in a “Two Party System,” consisting of the Private Protestants, or evangelicals, versus proponents of the social gospel, the Public Protestants.8 The bipolar thesis was received well in scholarly circles. It imposed binary
order to the confusing and crowded rank of Mainline Protestantism, as well provided validation for the modernist-fundamentalist debate that had been manifested for the American public in the highly publicized Scopes “monkey” trial of 1925.

Whether or not those who have studied the journal would acknowledge it, it is largely in the context of the Two Party paradigm that an understanding of the *Christian Century* during the interwar years currently exists. The term “liberal Protestantism” has become virtually synonymous with the journal in the taxonomy of religious history. The journal is regularly mined in scholarship as the exemplary voice of that more progressively thinking branch of religious thought. Recent studies by Robert Moates Miller, Donald Myer, and Marty himself are the most visible exemplars of this pattern. Journalists of both religious and secular magazines, like historians of religion, agree that the *Century* defined the left in the spectrum of Protestant politics. Said *Newsweek* on the occasion of editor Morrison’s 1947 retirement, “Through the liberal, undenominational policies of its editor, the *Christian Century* has become the most important organ of Protestant opinion in the world today.” Comments in numerous other publications mirror this conclusion. Only recently has historical understanding of this disjointed era of Protestant thought generated a counter argument to the dichotomized interpretive paradigm developed by Marty.

In a way the two schools of historiography inspired by Allen and Marty oppose one another. Students of more conventional forms of historical analysis, or “textbook” types of history, tend to overlook the possibility that a progressive intellectual journal of the *Century*’s content could exert national influence in such a material, conservative age. Conversely, those familiar with the history of Protestantism take for granted the fact that the theological liberalism of the journal permeates every facet of its social analysis. The
awkward historical positioning of the journal is directly attributed to its status as the bridge between the opposing forces of the institutional church and secular society. The Christian Century and its opinions more appropriately fit into a complex historical imagining of the years between the World Wars.

The editorial positions of the Century from 1919-1932 exemplified how theological liberals in practice were hesitant to diverge from conventional modes of religious morality, contrary to what has previous been contended. During this period, the nation was not completely lacking in an influential progressive impulse that registered nationally, nor was the left wing of Protestantism completely occupied by its liberal inclinations. This is not to claim that the Century was not among the most politically liberal and socially progressive editorializers of its time—all indications are that it was, though the purpose of this study is not comparative. However the labeling of the Century as “liberal” risks not only overlooking important currents in the journal’s opinions, but also discounts the fluidity among the different sects of Protestant thought and all of American society.

II. An Introduction to the Journal

The Christian Century is a lens through which the past can be examined in order to supplement our understanding of what contemporaries felt about what was happening in the United States in the 1920s and early 1930s. But like any other lens, the paper produces a relatively obscured and selective vision of its original subject. An examination of the Century’s journalistic assumptions and scope provides a clearer means to interpret the opinions that its editors expressed on American religious and secular society.
Historical Background

The journal’s origins date back to 1884, though its lasting identity did not begin to be molded until Charles Clayton Morrison purchased it in 1908. The *Century* was originally called the *Christian Oracle* and was a small denominational journal under the care of the Disciples of Christ with no national reputation and a modest circulation. The journal was in financial jeopardy and its future was uncertain. Morrison, a young Disciples minister, bought the fledging paper, or more appropriately, the mortgage for the building in Chicago were it was published, for $1,500. Morrison would serve as the *Century’s* editor in chief from that point until his 1947 retirement. Over the course of his tenure he would put his personal imprint on the periodical and its opinions.

The *Christian Century* carried the subtitle “An Undenominational Journal of Religion” by the end of World War I. Its evolution, both in official label and in identity, from a journal of the Disciples of Christ to an explicitly undenominational publication, was a reaction to the changing demography of its readers. Around the time of the war the *Century’s* readership began to greatly expand. It was no longer made up only of allegiant Disciples, but also Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Episcopalians, and even a few Methodists, among the other denominations. Furthermore, as Morrison recalled, a significant number of public leaders “who could hardly be classified as churchmen at all” were increasingly a part of the growing readership. The diversification of the readership was profitable in a business sense in addition to its editorial benefit, for in the pre-depression years the magazine did not yet embody the financial stalwart into which it would later develop.

The *Century’s* freedom from any official church affiliation allowed its editors to more freely critique American issues. Morrison admitted in his memoirs that he wished
for his publication to “transcend the controversial patterns that had long characterized Disciple journalism.” Despite the official break with the Disciples of Christ that became more firmly cemented as the interdenominational appeal of the *Century* became clear and fiscally advantageous, the journal ideologically guarded many of its Disciples roots. Many of the individuals on the *Century*’s staff kept close connections with other devout Disciples. The most obvious manifestation of Disciples doctrine was the paper’s ardent support of the ecumenical movement. Members of the denomination had long preached the reunification of the Protestant church, a subject that *Century* editors continued to broach long after its status as undenominational became an integral part of the paper’s identity.

Although the *Century* would struggle over numerous social issues during Morrison’s tenure as editor, sometimes reflecting ambivalent attitudes, the journal generally spoke with one voice. Anonymity within the pages of the paper was the product of what Morrison described as a “highly developed type of collective thinking.” According to Morrison, the *Century* “could not have functioned with any degree of success save as the origin of a collective mind whose members brought, each one, his own peculiar and complimentary contribution.” This body of religious thinkers was lead by Morrison, managing editor Paul Hutchinson, and literary editor Winfred Ernest Garrison, but also drew its guest writers from a pool of top minds in the discipline. While some of the longer feature articles written in the *Century* warranted a byline, the vast majority of editorials that appeared in the paper were unsigned. The journal’s editorial anonymity was representative of its underlying desire not only to present a united front in the face of potentially pointed criticism from rival theologians, but also to
suggest a moral and ethical authority, not unlike, and perhaps even vaguely hinting at, the
dogmas of the church.

By the time that the Great War had draw to a close, the readership of the *Christian
Century* had diversified and expanded to the point where the journal’s opinions occupied
a place in the national consciousness. By most accounts, its subscription list numbered in
the vicinity of 25,000-30,000 during the period of 1919-1932. In the context of a
population in the United States that was in excess of 110 million people, the *Century*
would seem to be proportionally insignificant. Still, circulation totals and demography do
not necessarily encapsulate the journal’s impact on the national scene—the relationship
between the paper and its readership cannot be defined absolutely in quantified terms.

A multiplicity of scholars have sought to put the influence of the *Christian Century*
in perspective, though the consensus is that the periodical’s impact was felt on a wide
rather than a religiously or culturally homogeneous scale. In 1963 A.P. Klauser offered
this arresting description of the range of the magazine:

The *Century* finds its way to readers behind the Iron and Bamboo
Curtains. It is in the Vatican Library and in the hallowed rooms of the
Bodleian Library at Oxford. It is in the White House, Pentagon, Senatorial
offices. Somewhere this moment in an outpost of civilization a missionary
is reading its pages.

In the lounges of scores of theological seminaries throughout the world
professors and pupils may be discussing an article or editorial from it
pages. At the same time somewhere else in a government embassy a
foreign minister may be glancing through its pages to learn what is being
said, thought and done in American church life.

Hyperbole aside, Klauser’s characterization of the *Century*’s far-reaching effect does
hold some historical weight. The striking base of influence that he attributes to the
journal echoes the conclusions of most contemporary onlookers, who have called the
*Century* the single most important religious journal of its time. If the periodical did not
hold the remarkable place among the halls of the most influential people in western civilization, then it at least was impressed upon a diverse group of intellectual recipients.

By the 1920s the Protestant press on the whole did not exert the same influence that it did in its mid 19th century heyday, although this industry-wide downtrend occurred in direct contrast to the Century's emergence. While other religious publications struggled, the Century undoubtedly won over some of their competitors' readership. In fact, three other magazines, all of some importance, merged with the paper in the 1920s and early '30s. The printed press also competed with the new, intriguing invention of the radiophone for the public's attention. It is interesting to note, however, that the radio's effect among more progressive-thinking Protestants was less than that of its evangelical, fundamentalist-leaning counterparts.

Donald Meyer cautions in the open pages of The Protestant Search for Political Realism, 1919-1941, "this book is not about typical men," explaining that the politically active, liberally leaning Protestant ministry was a very small minority. Some scholarship suggests that the Century's influence during the relevant historical period would not have extended very much beyond the Protestant arena. The melting-pot paradigm for American culture, popular as it may be, does not ensure extra-religious communication, or receptivity of outsiders' ideas by insulated cultural groups, especially those with a theological objective. Furthermore, sociological studies have confirmed that lines of social demarcation existed between Protestants and other religious groups during the period of study, contributing to a state of anxiety that would not have been eased by the Century's cautious treatment of Catholicism and Judaism (a subject that will later be discussed in detail). But as one scholar of the religious press argued, the Century did
allow "open-minded outsiders... to perceive grave public issues in a framework different from that of a secular magazine or newspaper." 24

Equally compelling, and appropriate for this study, is the interpretive model used by cultural historians such as T.J. Jackson Lears and Christopher Wilson. 25 Lears acknowledges that the historian can not account for the resistance and indifference to the ideas that were put forth by the academics, journalists, and ministers who wrote for the Century. He cautions us not to exaggerate their societal effect. Even so, these so-called "custodians of culture" are held to be extremely important to the historian's understanding of a given era. Notes Lears, these influential thinkers contributed to the establishment of the official "common sense" for ruling groups, and also, by developing cutting-edge ideas, served as theological lightning rods for social change. The majority of the readership of the Century consisted of educated Protestants from various denominations who, in most cases, approached the journal's contents with an open, inquisitive mind. A significant number of the readers of the journal, most likely a majority, were clergymen, with the remainder of the subscription list being rounded out by laymen and a few libraries. 26 The high percentage of exposure that the Century enjoyed among religious leadership suggests that these cultural leaders would, through official or more casual mediums, pass on the journal's commentary on prominent issues. This model implies that the Century had a greater role as an opinion-maker in many circles of American thought than would be expected from its relatively modest circulation.
I. Detecting Editorial Patterns

After considering the historiographic context and the basic character of the *Christian Century* in the years following the First World War, a closer examination of the paper itself can now be pursued. The analysis that follows assumes the *Century’s* nation influence. The journal’s editorial convictions were a product of the era in which it was written; those dilemmas facing editors were the same issues that many Americans had to deal with on a day-to-day basis. While the collection of passages taken from *Christian Century* issues from 1919-1932 that are cited in the proceeding pages admittedly represent a miniscule portion of thousands of pages of editorial commentary in the journal, the opinions referenced were used because they largely represent dominant, reoccurring themes in how the journal’s editors address the most prominent social issues of the time.

As we have seen, the term *liberal Protestantism* and the *Christian Century* have become one and the same: “Liberal” is routinely assumed to characterize the *Century*, and the journal has become the voice of that branch of Protestant theology. Over time this assumption has helped to polarize the continuum of Protestant thought in the eyes of scholars and in popular opinion. Public rhetoric put forth on both sides of the modernist-fundamentalist debate of the 1920s did little to repudiate the notion of a strict dichotomy in Protestant belief. The declaration of J. Gresham Machen, the foremost fundamentalist scholar of his era who accused liberal theologians of belonging to a religion “entirely
different” from Christianity, was not out of the ordinary in the holy war of words. Public devaluation of the opponent’s worth naturally was a part of the intense, emotional rivalry, and also served as propaganda that could contribute to the cause.¹

The appreciable differences between the liberal and fundamentalist schools of theology have eclipsed the underlying ambiguities that were prevalent in how fundamentalists, and theological liberals in particular, formulated a definitive worldview based upon religious creed. Fundamentalism predicated its view of society on an uncompromising belief in biblical literalism, while liberals put their stock in biblical criticism and interpretation, creating the essential rift that estranged the rival groups. However, the manner in which Protestant liberals projected onto society the doctrine that they distilled from the bible did not parallel the radical division they had with their religious counterparts over interpretation of the Christian text. Liberals’ worldview was still very much based upon a latent form of religious conservatism. Editor Charles Clayton Morrison, in a 1938 editorial, cautioned his readership not to misconstrue the liberal reputation of the magazine: “The Christian Century, though characterized by its public as a ‘liberal’ organ, held its liberalism with reservations. There was always a consciousness of a wider and deeper background.”² That broad context was undoubtedly shaped by editors’ engrained religious morality.

The blurring of the line between traditional notions of liberalism and conservatism could be attributed to what Morrison called the Century’s “integrated personality”. In a retrospective editorial, he revealed exactly how the diversity of opinion that colored the journal’s editorials was born out of the combination of religious and secular stimuli feeding into its complex form of social inquiry:

By the end of the 1920’s, I was beginning to be conscious of the discrepancy between my two loyalties—my instinctive loyalty to my
Christian inheritance and my intellectual loyalty to an empirical method of thought. I had baptized the whole Christian tradition in the waters of psychological empiricism, and was vaguely awaking to the fact that after this procedure, what I had left was... an “integrated personality.”

Though rarely, if ever, addressed specifically in the pages of the *Century*, the assumption that traditional Christian values and the tools of modern reason and empiricism could coexist was implicit in the journal’s social prognoses for the American system. A breadth of issues were reviewed in the journal’s pages, but editorial opinion always cast a decisively Christian structure on them.

While the marriage between Christianity and modernity was at the heart of the journal’s theology, one sometimes weighed more heavily than the other. Patterns emerged in how the journal treated the wide range of social issues that were directly attributed to its dual—and competing—interests in devout religiosity and social progressivism. Depending on the subject, editors’ Protestant religiosity, their sense of equality and humanity, or a combination of the two, governed how the *Century* reacted to a particular social problem. The *Century* differentiated between what it viewed as issues pertaining to the individual, in which it normally endorsed an egalitarian worldview, and others concerning the greater “social good,” where a prevailing moral absolutism and pragmatism tended to be determinant. The magazine’s commitment to the social gospel underscored its liberal reputation.

The most fundamental belief echoed in the *Christian Century* during the ‘20s was a persistent optimism about human progress. Editors of the journal devoted such a great deal of energy to the task of diagnosing the ills of society because they held the improvement of the American system to be both beneficial and achievable. It is from this platform of optimism that the *Century* derived the various components of its complex worldview: its religious morality, pragmatic approach, and its egalitarian belief. All of
these principles were dependent on the notion that tomorrow could and would be better than today. The disillusionment that editors felt in response to the suffering resulting from the Great Depression wore on their optimistic approach, to the point where, by 1932, the Century no longer functioned as the stalwart of the social gospel that it once was.

The most significant issues that the journal considered have been grouped according to how editorial opinion in that particular case matched popular notions of liberalism, embodied in broad terms by rationality, toleration of new ideas, and freedom from bigotry and authoritarian attitudes. By all means, the Century’s liberal and more theologically conservative motivations bled into and affected one another, each in turn contributing to how the journal perceived American society. Do not mistake the system of analysis that is used in this study for a strict historical model in the vein of the Two Party system—the boundaries defined by the fit with traditional liberalism is more a tool for organization than anything else. To miss this objective would be to miss one of the most essential points of the thesis, that is, the fluid exchange of ideas and concepts throughout the spectrum of Protestant theology.

II. Economic and Political Programming: “Liberal” as a Clear Fit

Of the major domestic issues considered in the 1920s and early 1930s, the political and economic spheres most consistently reflected decidedly liberal inclinations on the part of the Century. These areas were the clearest targets of social gospel reform. This trend could be attributed in part to the fact that the journal’s theological beliefs about politics and the economy tended to correspond most appropriately with a traditionally libertarian approach. The most transparent example of this alignment was the Century’s
antiwar approach, which was based upon the pacifist ideals of Jesus. To a lesser extent, the journal’s willingness to embrace what was shaping up as the “New Liberalism”—socialism—also resembled dedication to other Christian concepts, namely social inclusivity and practical equality.

What to Do with War

The Century’s championing of anti-war legislation from the first days after World War I until the international ratification of the Kellog-Briand Pact in 1928 was the most perceivable editorial manifestation of its optimistic approach rooted in Christianity. Simply put, since Jesus preached a pacifistic approach, the Century thought that the United States should cultivate peaceful diplomatic relationships. In a 1920 article entitled Jesus and War,” the paper plainly explained, “War is inherently un-Christian and necessarily involves the violation of or the going contrary to the spirit and teaching of Jesus Christ.” The application of Jesus’ life and teachings to modern society naturally coordinated the journal’s editorial opinions with a progressive form of thinking.

The pacifist objectives of the Century owed much of their inspiration to the journal’s leader. Charles Clayton Morrison was well known nationally as an impassioned anti-war advocate and devoted much of his personal time, even outside the realm of his editorial position, to promoting the cause. After the end of the Great War, the magazine deliberated inconclusively about how to avoid a similar fate in the future. It acknowledged the disillusionment and sorrow of the American “post-war psychology,” while still expressing a mild pleasure with how the war’s aftermath had stimulated a marked spiritual and moral reemergence. True, memberships at places of worship nationwide increased with consistency over the course of the decade to follow.
By 1923 Morrison and his staff had settled upon the legislative outlawry of war in the international community as one of its primary editorial targets. Only the subject of Prohibition rivaled the pacifist agenda as the most covered issue in the paper. The journal declared that the international movement to ban war was the “absolutely sole hope of mankind for peace and friendship.” 6 How the Century handled the campaign against war in its final stages of international diplomacy exhibited one of two things: either the editorial staff was in agreement that it would use the magazine as a medium for Morrison’s personal work on the pacifist effort; or Morrison himself exerted his power as editor in chief by filling the paper disproportionately with his own views on the issue. Either way, as the Kellog-Briand law began to crystallize the Century would devote major portions of many of its editions to pacifist propaganda, and a consistent output of related new articles. It even advertised “Dr. Morrison’s new book” on the subject, on the front page no less, furthermore asserting that it was “of vital interest to every Christian Century subscriber.” 7 When the Kellogg-Briand Peace Pact became a reality in 1928, the Century reacted with boisterous optimism about the future. The journal did not shy away from or speak cautiously about those topics it felt strongly about, and the antiwar movement was no exception.

A bill that outlaws war may seem to us rather unrealistic and naïve. The harsh realities of World War II, particularly Hitler’s immense power base in Europe and the soon uncovered horrors Nazi death camps, made war seem like a necessity (though Vietnam later inspired the opposite view). Nonetheless, the value that the Morrison and the Century placed on the Kellog-Briand pact should be given its deserved weight as a well-intentioned endeavor not to be cheapened to the point of historical worthlessness by
hindsight. The men who worked on the pact and those who steadfastly supported it truly believed that they were making positive contributions to future international relations.

The American Economic and Political System

A fusion of elements of Wilsonian progressivism and the Christian social gospel formed the Century's prevailing prognosis for the American governmental system and the way of life that it encouraged. The journal never expressed consistent interest in the political superstructure itself, only in those selected cases where the abuses of individuals and special groups imperiled the government's ability to function with efficiency and honor.

The Century became increasingly dissatisfied with the Harding and Coolidge administrations as the scandals that tainted the respective presidencies unfolded. Harding, who had been characterized on the occasion of his death as a man of admirable qualities, was scolded by the Century when the Teapot Dome incident entered the realm of public knowledge. The journal's distaste for the unethical track being pursued by top-ranking American politicians undoubtedly contributed to its souring on President Coolidge as well. (Of course, his complacency in supporting effective tactics for the enforcement of the prohibition law also affected its attitude.) In the early stages of his presidency the magazine was receptive to the popular characterization of "Cool Cal" as the strong, silent type. Subsequent editorial disenchantment with the president was qualified by the assertion that this Coolidge reputation was entirely mythic. The assessment of localized politics in Chicago and the state of Illinois mirrored the Century's take on the federal scene in that its most basic goal was integrity in government.
The primary political concerns of the *Century* were embedded in its economic theory. The journal envisioned effective government as having an intimate relationship with the national economy. On the bicentennial anniversary of Adam Smith’s birthday, instead of celebrating the thinker’s great achievements, the paper reminded its readership that the doctrine of laissez faire was “wholly inadequate” and called for a remarriage of economics and ethics. Editors believed that American markets and enterprise were not entitled to autonomy because capitalist profiteers breached ethical codes by ignoring the necessities of the masses. Although in its most basic form the paper’s “big government” economic approach carried on the torch of social progressivism, admittedly, the stance was motivated too by theology: “Religion cannot accept without protest...[an] order in which men wallow in sudden wealth which they have not created while their fellows by the million face want.” Editorial opinion was swayed by the fundamental belief that human suffering should not come at the cost of the decadence of the minority benefactors of the capitalist system. On some occasions, the *Century* explicitly prescribed economic changes that it thought could eradicate the social ills of unemployment and misdistribution of wealth. One editor suggested that a steeply graduated income tax be introduced in order to facilitate an economic hierarchy less polar in character. The inclination of the *Century* to advocate heavy-handed, socialist-type reforms in the early postwar years foreshadowed its political drift further to the left that later would be spurred on by the social affects of national catastrophe.

The *Century* was impressively prophetic about the arrival of the depression, though in part its impatience with capitalism naturally dictated that editorial columns forecast the “flawed” system’s eventual failure. The key to on-point editorial analysis of the nation’s economic situation was the recognition of the growing unemployment problem, largely
ignored due to national preoccupation with the skyrocketing stock market of the late '20s. It was the unemployment factor which inspired the paper to make the bold claim in June of 1928 that “even the amateur economist can see tendencies in our modern life which prompt the conviction that the joyride of our prosperity is at an end.” But again, these comments were probably stimulated by theological rather than economic intuition. Although editorials made the onset of disaster, as a consequence of the speculative gorging of the public, seem imminent, one must be careful not to mistake the journal’s religious intellectuals for gifted financial prophets. Those subtle signs of the Great Depression tended to correlate with those same immoral practices in society that the Century so readily attacked in its articles. Work done by contemporary economic historians has given few signs that the crash was inevitable.

The calls of the Century for federalized economic control suggested a politically liberal investment in big government, though this consideration was fermented primarily on the grounds of religious ethicality during the time of American prosperity. As the national economy deteriorated, the journal’s readiness to adopt socialized forms of government became even more pronounced. The direction of the Century towards a categorical socialist agenda accelerated in parallel with its mounting disillusionment over the repercussions of economic depression. Editors individually and as a cohesive staff toyed with the idea of endorsing socialist party candidate Norman Thomas during the 1932 election. As late as those few weeks leading up to the election, the paper admitted, “Much can be said in favor of voting for Norman Thomas. The socialist party represents ideals and a program far more closely in accord with the ideals of Christianity than does either of the major parties.” But in the end the practicality of editors prevented a formal marriage between the Century and the socialist party. The journal did not believe that a
third party candidate had the platform of political influence necessary to make the wholesale changes needed in government. One column depicted third parties as ‘pantomimic—their supporters make the gestures of citizenship but leave the actual powers of government to be operated by others.’

The Democratic candidate, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, inspired misgivings for the journal as well. His reputation for Big Navy and hesitancy to endorse the League of Nations militated against one of the magazine’s bread-and-butter issues, its antiwar agenda. The Century settled on Hoover once again as its candidate of choice, almost literally by default. While it publicly supported the Republican incumbent, the conservative, pragmatic pick was still colored by strongly leftist editorial opinions. As it was, the Century rapidly became disposed in Roosevelt’s favor by the early months of his presidency when it realized how he shared its commitment to federalized economic discipline.

Treatment of Dissenters and Radicals

American uneasiness about suspicious developments in the governments of other countries did not deter the Christian Century from resolutely upholding the individual rights of the nation’s citizens. The rise of the Bolsheviks in Russia that came in tandem with revolutions in Eastern Europe in 1918 and 1919 increased the public’s anxiety about the threat of communism in a domestic and international climate recuperating from the toll of the war. The Century did not allow the perceived communist threat to supercede its endorsement of the civil freedoms of certain individuals. At the earliest sign of injustice in 1920 the journal voiced its displeasure with the anti-Communist campaign that was becoming institutionalized in the halls of American government. Confronting the
political sentiment personified by the raids of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, editors denounced the “red complex” that had advanced in the American psyche: “In a democracy, men have lost faith in democracy. Instead of meeting radicalism with conservatism, a cowardly spirit has sought the use of policemen and prisons to stamp out opinions that seem undesirable.” 18 Editorial objection to the persecution of radical citizens was as much attributed to its ineffectiveness as to its inappropriateness.19 The paper’s response to Palmer’s inauspicious agenda characterized an attitude that would remain steadfast over the coarse of the decade.

While it supported the basic freedom of expression of political dissidents, the journal did not agree with the agendas of many of the anarchists and other radicals who were being arrested, and even deported. Sometimes editors’ apparent frustration with these disruptive forces would be outwardly expressed—the Century on occasion referred to radicals as “undesirable citizens.” 20 For the journal political protest and nontraditional social habits did not serve the public good by continually testing the status quo, though they still had to be tolerated because of the basic rights granted to U.S. citizens. Morrison and his staff, moreover, where less likely to lament political radicals since they themselves had publicly suggested alignment with the socialist party, which by no means in the political mainstream during the period.

Not surprisingly, the Century eventually joined the chorus that demanded a thorough reexamination of the Sacco-Vanzetti case in South Braintree, Massachusetts, a remnant of the Red Scare that dated back to 1920.21 The journal was convinced that an injustice had been done and it was unthinkable that an honest, legal review of the case would result in the conviction of either man.22 When the court decision failed to be overturned, the paper fumed over the judicial prejudice in the case. As the Sacco-Vanzetti
incident began to further attract negative publicity on an international scale, the journal warned not to “hold a nation responsible for the act of a single court in a single state.” The ramifications of case in the court of public opinion forced the Century to retract some of its libertarian rhetoric in favor of pragmatism.

The post-war hysteria over communism having drifted out of the public eye, the Century in the latter part of the ‘20s took advantage of incidents of public protest to more precisely hint at its socialist inclinations. The journal’s editors seemed well aware that the American public was hesitant to accept socialist politics, no matter how minimal. The magazine established itself as a strong supporter of socialist Eugene Debs. On the occasion of his death, an editorial satirized, “Now he is safely dead, and we can praise him.” The Century, evidently sensing a more receptive audience for its quasi-socialist attitudes, introduced was became progressively audacious political reflections. The Red Scare a thing of the past, the journal eagerly pointed out how ridiculous public fears of practical socialism actually were: “The workers party has been holding public sessions in the city of New York. And the government at Washington still lives!” The depression that carried through the Hoover years would see the further blossoming of the magazine’s socialist inclinations.

The Century’s quest to protect the human rights of American citizens in the spirit of traditional liberalism extended into other arenas of social critique. The journal endorsed humane treatment of people in the work place, supporting measures that would promote a safer working environment. A 1926 article embodied the paper’s determination that the rights of incarcerated citizens should also be protected, as one editor exposed “Brutalities in the chain gang.” In dealing with more isolated issues such as these that did not
appeal to a national audience nor present the risk of sparking far-reaching tensions, the *Century* felt free to pursue its egalitarian objectives.

**Science and Religion**

The *Century* closely guarded the notion of an evolving society in which modern science and Christian belief could complement one another—its editors were decidedly religious though also of the opinion that modernization was more or less a positive process. After the World War, on the cusp of a new decade, the paper asserted, “The task of the coming years is that of constructive and not destructive action.” 28 In light of the assumption of religious vitality in a modern world, *The Fundamentals*, a series of paperback volumes published 1910-1915 and distributed across the country, became a symbolic point of reference for an emerging nationwide movement that operated counter to the staff’s essential understanding of the modern world. The five-point doctrine declared the inerrancy of the bible, the virgin birth of Jesus, his sustitionary atonement, the bodily resurrection, and the authenticity of biblical miracles. In the mind of the *Century* these doctrine were incompatible with the modernizing Christian world. The paper viewed the movement almost as a triviality that concerned itself with “controversies about the minutiae of practice and belief.” 29 It was inevitable that fundamentalism could not exist in contemporary society. The tendency to discredit and dismiss the fundamentalist cause remained a standard in the journal from the movement’s early rise until it became obscured from the public eye by the late twenties.

The *Century* held the position that modern science and Christianity could not only exist concurrently but furthermore complement one another. While on the surface the acceptance of evolutionary theory and biblical spirituality seems to be mutually
contradictory, editorial opinion in the journal provided a sharp divergence between science and religion: Science dealt with factual evidence, while religion dictated moral code. The imagined break between the two endorsed by the *Century* was not explained in depth. Rather, it was assumed that both scientific and religious inquiry could exist in a modern world. In order to authenticate this intrinsic dichotomy between science and religion, the *Century* covered forums of scholars who supported the notion that science and religious creeds could coexist, and quoted academics who had backgrounds in science while at the same time maintaining a devotion to a Christian church. The practice of selectively covering events that supported the journal’s editorial doctrine was standard protocol for certain subjects, as will later be seen with Prohibition. The religious ambiguities about which the paper spoke conclusively were predicated on theory rather than empirical support, though the presence of scholarly rhetoric implied a heightened air of authority.

III. Individual Difference: Testing the Boundaries of Theological Liberalism

The notion that a greater social good should be sought for the entirety of the American system was one of the primary concerns of the *Christian Century*. Very much a product of popularized antebellum progressive trends in the United States and Christianity’s tradition of inclusivity, the journal concentrated a portion of its energies on the shaping of national social practices on a communitarian rather than on an individual basis. The *Century* had long been known to be wary of the evils of “narrow individualism.” Still, the journal kept an attentive eye towards the issue of basis individual civil rights, as much because they were essential to macroscopic social function as due to their appeal to the editors’ engrained Judeo-Christian value system.
Social mechanisms of intolerance have been a staple of western civilization and were undoubtedly present in the United States between from 1919-1932. What is more difficult to determine is whether these syndromes were as prevalent as they have been made out to be, and how the most prominent imagined divisions in society—race, ethnicity, and religion—compared to one another. (Gender was not a primary focus in the paper at the time.) All indications in the Christian Century suggest those American channels for the exchange of ideas about individual differences were incredibly dynamic.

To put the Century’s opinions in perspective, it is essential to recognize that they were addressing social problems that had yet to reach maturation in public understanding. Editors debated patterns of racial and religious discrimination decades before United States had experienced a movement in civil rights or elected its first non-Protestant president. In this context their opinions were markedly open-minded to change. Clearly American ideas about individual difference during the era cannot be blanket ed by the notorious discriminatory character of the Ku Klux Klan, which was rejuvenated in the 1920s. However, even the theological “liberals” employed by the paper were drawn to favor the maintenance of hierarchical social distance between groups. Protestant traditionalism and new-wave egalitarian ideas both fed into the journal’s ambivalent approach to cultural difference among individuals.

**Race**

Undoubtedly the varyingly latent and manifest racial tension that predominated the interwar years was the main topic concerning individual rights that attracted the attention of Century pundits. Racial commentary is also the yardstick by which history has measured the vitality of the journal’s liberal thinking on individual rights. The men and
women employed by the magazine were decidedly progressive thinkers, compared to their contemporaries, when it came to racial considerations. An attempt to impose the post-civil rights movement egalitarian ethic on the journal’s editorial opinion about race would be a misjudgment of the Century’s character. Contemporary semantics would define its stance of race as “separate but equal.” The paper could be said to have championed a practical equality by the early 1930s. This means that by this point, it believed in an egalitarian-type principle that could and should be sensibly practiced on a day-to-day basis in society. But this approach was not entirely free of conservative elements—editorials treated racial topics with caution and hesitated to propose systematic change that could escalate conflict in an already hostile climate.

The Century came to a full realization of social need for practical equality among the races only after struggling with the race issue for much of the 1920s. Perhaps no other social problem more confounded the editors, yet in another respect, with no issue during this era did a more drastic change in tone take place than in those columns about the racial question. Earlier in the period, the paper’s theological thirst for a social expression of Judeo-Christian values competed with its investment in pragmatism. On one hand, the journal preached a positive, though inconclusive, sense of cooperation among the races predicated on biblical teachings: “For the colored and white men alike everywhere the standard is ‘thou shall love thy neighbor as thy self.’” 32 But in practice the Century had a difficult time envisioning how to replicate the theory of peaceful racial coexistence in a difficult socioeconomic environment.

Black migration to the orth during World War into traditionally white enclaves exacerbated an already tense relationship between the races. The Chicago race riots on 1919 may have even affected editors on a personal level. In an era in which debilitating
Jim Crow laws and a regenerated Ku Klux Klan were flourishing, it is not entirely surprising that the *Century* made these glum remarks in an editorial aptly titled "Learning to live with the Negro":

The south seems at the present time in a more judicial state of mind on this question than do those Northern communities...the south has lived so long with the Negro that the better minds seem to understand him better... subordination will never be accepted by all Negro leaders. On the other hand, no one is able to suggest any other basis that does not involve the increase of friction to the encouragement of social intermingling. 33

The *Century* felt that civil equality in practice seemed destined to degenerate into social strife, whereas the system of racial inequality in place was a proven way of avoiding outbreaks of violence, so dreaded by pacifist *Century* editors. The journal rationalized that segregation would eventually “take care of itself,” if for not other reason than it saw no practical solution to the racial situation that immediately proceeded World War I.

The dissolution of certain agents of early ‘20s racial tension, coupled with a more concerted effort on the part of the *Century* to retain is belief in social progress, contributed to the journal’s emerging belief that practical equality need be introduced into the American system. The paper was quite happy to see the Klan’s rapid demise after its brief revival. Incidents related to the Klan were mentioned infrequently in its pages, though when they were, editorial opinion was quick and decisive in denouncing the practices of Klansmen and any individual who supported the group, when he was Protestant or not, religious or otherwise. By 1927, the *Century* pronounced the Klan "on its last legs," though its influence had decreased significantly even before that. 34 With fewer sources of antagonistic potential and having recovered from its World War I psychological hangover, the journal felt that the United States was now better prepared for challenges to the status quo. The paper had begun to notice a subtle change in attitudes about lynching; they were at least not greeted with the “nonchalance” that they
were in the recent past. These were not big steps, but neither were most that had been
taken since the Civil War.

The journal began to speak with a more forceful, opportunistic voice on the race
issue, cataloguing specific public instances of tension to demonstrate the urgency of the
societal problem. A 1931 court case that involved the arrest of a group of young black
men in Alabama for assaulting two white girls on a train aroused editorial suspicion on
the grounds of purportedly “flimsy evidence.” The paper made an example of the case,
hammering away with more than a dozen pointed articles on the racial injustice that the
incident represented. On the subject of “Can Negro citizens ride in Pullmans?” the
Century voiced the fundamentals of its matured conception of practical equality:
“Whatever justification may be argued for the social separation of the races, any arbitrary
deprivation of equal treatment before the law or in the purchase of the necessary
commodities of life, such as a bed when traveling, cannot be justified.” This editorial
view still operated on the premise of a religious basis for equality among races but now
considered the legality of the issue as a primary concern. The journal not only had come
to believe that equality needed to be pursued, but, from its more authoritative words,
appearently envisioned a time when blacks and whites could be granted equal rights under
the law.

The Christian Century was not particularly comfortable dealing with the issue of
race, for whatever reason. The journal more confidently critiqued abuses of individual
civil liberties where racial boundaries did not separate the editor from his or her subject.
John Hefley, who studied the paper in considerable detail, argued that the editorial
awkwardness towards race stemmed from a “mildly held Anglo-Saxonism.” This
theory cast the journal’s editors as believing white Anglo-Saxons and their cultural
tradition to be the naturally superior of any racial stock. There is no definite expression of these supremacist beliefs in the magazine’s pages, yet it would not be surprising that any one of the Century editors, however devoted to social progressivism, harbored racist feelings. What does appear certain is that the Century considered blacks to be not necessarily inferior, but rather inherently different from whites. Simply put by the journal, “Prejudices arise out of differences. Black and white are different.”\(^{37}\) The following passage hints at how these perceived differences in racial background were imposed on the social and cultural levels:

The Negro has found a shortcut to happiness. He has acquired the art of living because he has learned the science of life... the white man excels in organization. Discipline and efficiency; the Negro in poetry, music, oratory, dance, wit and humor, an in all of the ways that bring happiness and joy.\(^{38}\)

Ambiguities and contradictions were as much a part of the Century’s discourse on race as any other topic addressed by its editors. On thing is certain: the journal’s editors earnestly endeavored to be objective about race. Its sense of practicality and maybe even its own cultural background undermined this objectivity. If nothing else, the paper demonstrated a willingness to let its opinions mature over time, as well as voice some shrewd remarks about racial issues.

**Ethnicity**

Immigration was a paramount social issue during the time, as waves of immigrants swept in from Mexico, from the many European countries, and Japan. Public sentiment gathered against the immigrants, and it often had an understandable basis for complaint: Immigrants competed with American citizens for work, and often times won out because they would accept less pay. Many of the new immigrants made their voyage to the United
States as a temporary venture to amass money. They settled in isolated groupings in urbanized areas, and presented a perceived threat, with their diversity of cultures, to American unity.

The Century, though cognizant of the rift between entrenched American populations and the new citizens, continued to express its support for the civil rights of immigrants. Japanese immigrants, among the those who felt the greatest sting of intolerance, were welcomed with open arms by the journal. The paper denounced “Japanopobia,” emphasizing that the most prudent way to deal with the Japanese was to treat this “resourceful and proud people” as “persons rather than a proscribed race.” 39 In addition, the journal was careful to criticize agencies that were intolerant of immigrants, always ready to point out the contradictions within their antagonistic platforms. In response to individuals who rallied to the cry of “One Hundred Per Cent Americanism,” the Century astutely noted that the only pure Americans are the “red Indians,” none of which belong to those organizations that made such claims.40

The immigration question was met with a tolerant attitude on the party of the Century, yet not free of Christian designs for proliferation of religion in number and influence. Editorials used the immigration question as a vehicle for commentary on other social issues that were considered important. The status of immigrants as many and proliferating, as well as relatively impressionable, was seen dually through the eyes of the journal as both a potential problem and an opportunity. How to practically and passively integrate the new arrivals into society in itself demanded reorganization “of unparalleled magnitude,” 41 but the means by which this could be achieved were never really addressed. More importantly, immigrants were an unclaimed body of future citizens who could become political assets to the cause of Protestant social progressivism. Given these
ambitions, the paper asserted that “no program of purely secular education will truly Americanize our immigrants... Americanization must include neighborliness and religious idealism if it is to succeed.” If and only if these new Americans could be infected with a religious spirit would they make positive contributions to the nation. Although the magazine consistently favored the inclusion of immigrants into an American system that protected basic individual freedoms, the journal did not look at the issue free of its religious impulse.

Religious Diversity

The existence of non-Protestant religious influences in American society, namely Catholicism and Judaism, forced the *Christian Century* to the crossroads at which its tenets of religious conservatism and social liberalism met. It editors struggled to develop a workable approach to other religions that could cater to a propensity for fairness while at the same time come to terms with the long history of Protestant intolerance of other religions. The effects of the *Century’s* deep Protestant misgivings were manifested in its editorials as a subtle distrust of its Catholic and Jewish contemporaries. Thus the liberal egalitarian ethic as applied to religious tolerance was not as succinctly presented by the magazine as it was in case of people who differed from the mainstream in terms of their race, ethnicity, or personal political agenda.

The journal was quick to distinguish between a Catholic individual and the Roman Catholic Church. A Catholic could be forgiven for his affiliation with the papal hierarchy, though that organization itself, and its actions, where thoroughly unacceptable. Editorial opinion remained true to the fundamental ideas that had given birth to the Protestant movement. The feelings harbored by the *Century* about the Catholic Church echoed the
Protestant separatist spirit: “To live in America this ancient religion much needs in modernization and democratization.”  Even in critiquing the individual Catholic, the journal found it difficult to keep in check its emotional attachment to the traditional division between Protestantism and Catholicism. Answering the question of whether Catholics were Christians, the Century snapped, “Yes, Catholics are Christians. Anybody is a Christian who chooses to call himself so. This is a free country.”  The moderate, egalitarian voice of the journal was present, though it struggled to order its emotions in giving any clear meaning to the tolerance of Catholics. What was offered to the readership was an image of Catholicism still stigmatized by the most fundamental of Protestant attitudes.

Practicing Jews were easier for editors to accept because Judaism did not incite the emotion response that did Catholicism. On the most rudimentary level, Protestants did not have the engrained antipathy for Jewish practices that they for Catholic habits, stemming from the religious institutionalization that the Reformation had addressed. Moreover, Jews did not represent the perceived threat that Catholicism did in relationship to immigration. Contrasting its public disapproval with the idea of Al Smith, an admitted Catholic, as president, the Century surmised that it would have no problem giving its full support to a Jewish presidential candidate. It at times was encouraged by the progress being made in the relationship between Christian and Jew. The magazine admitted that it found liberal Jewish theology to have “astonishing similarity” with that of a modern-minded Christian. Yet editors could not hide their distaste for Jews who embodied the tradition of Judaic piety and cultural seclusion. The Century was far more willing to accept Jews into the Christianized world than it was willing to make inroads into the Jewish realm.
The Scopes Trial and Anti-Fundamentalism

To the American public in the 1920s and early 1930s, the highly publicized standoff between theological modernists and fundamentalists was the most outwardly identifiable religious issue of the era. The debate has represented for both scholars and in the forum of public opinion the most conspicuous exhibition of the clash between the incumbent conservative worldview and the tenets of a rapidly modernizing world. The Century philosophically denounced the dogmatism of Protestant orthodoxy. Embracing a loose interpretation of the Bible, pragmatism, and Darwinian evolution, the journal’s support with regard to the public debate between the modernists and fundamentalists consistently swung to the former. The public polarization of theological stances, however, was not always mimicked in the pages of the paper.

The infamous “Monkey Trial” concerning the teaching of evolution in public schools became imprinted in the mind of the public as the key battle of the fundamentalist-modernist debate. Fittingly set in the rural town of Dayton, Tennessee, the trial pitted William Jennings Bryan, the most visible fundamentalist of the day, against another prominent lawyer of the time, Clarence Darrow. The trial concerned John Scopes, a public school biology teacher who had taught evolution in class, contrary to the Tennessee law of 1925 that had banned the practice. 48

While the nation was fixated by the scene in the summer of 1925, the Century dismissed the trial as insignificant, feeling that the notoriety of the prosecuting and defense attorney, as well as the press frenzy over the trial, obscured the underlying issues of the case. Concluded the paper, “We will be able to follow it with complete equanimity and know that the cause of truth will be little advanced by the victory or defeat of either contestant.” 49 This tone of indifference seems out of place for a journal with frequently
referred to the fundamentalist sect of Protestantism as “medieval” and unequivocally viewed their religious orthodoxy as a hindrance to the maturation of modern Christianity. The journal’s prevailing editorial opinion remained aloof even as the fundamentalists continued to campaign for their cause among multiple states in the southern region of the nation. The intellectual sympathies of editors rested with the defense in the Scopes trial, though their assumption that “modernized Christianity” was a forgone conclusion governed in their prevailing disregard for of the legal proceedings—there was nothing that would prevent its proliferation. The *Century* even took on a sarcastic tone when commenting on the legal proceedings, casting the events as utterly absurd.

Bills prohibiting the teaching of evolution in the public schools were introduced on January 13 in the legislatures of Arkansas and Alabama. Perhaps the militant anti-evolutionists are taking up the fight alphabetically… To make this legislation more effective the teaching of history ought also to be outlawed, especially the history of ideas. The journal’s quick dismissal of the Scopes trial and the fundamentalist movement, despite the fact that both registered extensively throughout the nation, demonstrated that the *Century* did not blindly follow in the footsteps of theological liberals, even on the most publicly significant of issues.

IV. Religious Morality and its Incongruities wit Liberalism

By all accounts, the Protestant establishment in virtually every strata of American society by the end of World War I was not nearly as muscular as in its 19th century heyday. The *Christian Century* took the gradual erosion of institutional Protestant dominion in stride, but it clung tightly to Christianity’s basic, overarching system of values. It cannot be overemphasized that those motives driving the editors of *Century*
were invariably religious ones, which regularly took precedence over and even rendered mute the journal’s liberal tendencies. Editor Morrison explained accordingly, “I had resigned from the pastorate to become an editor but I never lost my sense of being a Christian minister. My desk became my pulpit, and the subscribers were my congregation.” 52 Morrison and his colleagues felt that its foremost task lay in exploring how Christian ethics, embodied by Jesus’ teachings, could practically be applied to twentieth century social structures that were no longer dominated by rank-and-file Protestants.

The *Century* fervently rejected the “dogmas of church” as the set of guidelines by which an individual’s life could be led in the modern world. Ecclesiastical authority, said the paper, was far too slow to react to the ever-changing currents of public necessity.53 Although old religious ecclesiastical doctrine were presumed to be out of place in the early 20th century, editors were not prepared to completely abandon the precedent of doctrinal theological order:

> Since the enlarging world-view cannot be cramped back into conformity with the statements and implications of ancient creed, we must make new statements of old faith which it shall be possible for men to think in a modern world.54

The journal’s skepticism about Church dogma, especially those doctrines promulgated by the Roman Catholic church, could be mistaken for a perspective on secular society that is free of Christian tradition. Despite their conspicuous disapproval of dogmatic claims, Morrison and his staff, though they never explicitly stated so, very much valued some form of religious creed. True, a changing American social and cultural landscape tested its bounds, but the theological drive was retained, if not standardized, throughout the period in question.
Religious historian William Hutchison refers to this theological sense of responsibility as a “custodianship” that was based on the inference of the cultural authority of the church. The principles of this code were an uncompromising belief in the moral goodness of Christianity and in the essentiality of social change embodied in the social gospel as a means to expedite religious morality in society. The Century’s habit of downgrading the value of institutional dogmatic authority hid the journal’s own closely guarded set of predisposed doctrine from which it devised its social critique, which in many cases resembled a remarkably conservative approach.

Prohibition

Prohibition was the magazine’s major preoccupation between 1919 and 1932 and the most blatant example of its conservative agenda. In the eyes of the Century, there was no way that the pursuit of morality in the modern world could be achieved without the prohibition of alcohol. Fredrick Allen in Only Yesterday called Prohibition the “most violently explosive public issue of the nineteen-twenties.” The journal’s staff evidently agreed with the historian’s judgement, since it devoted so much attention to the prohibition experiment in its pages. On the whole, it spoke of Prohibition with a greater air of authority and with more frequency than any other issue of the era. Because the paper strongly felt that the law, which lasted from its ratification in 1919 by way of the Eighteenth Amendment until its 1933 death, was more important than other societal problem, it allowed its editorial preoccupation with the experiment to saturate its opinions about other issues.

The Century never debated the moral status of Prohibition in its pages. For the journal, when the law went into effect in January of 1920, it was a product of the “will of
The Prohibition amendment, announced the journal, was "the most constructive and necessary piece of legislation that has been enacted since the declaration of independence was signed." Each citizen had a moral obligation to obey the law and it was assumed that everyone would do so in order to avoid the unmitigated evil of alcohol. Considering the extent to which the issue of Prohibition would occupy the Century's editorial musings over the next thirteen years of its existence, in hindsight it is ironic that editors greeted its inception as an essentially foregone conclusion. The magazine declared that the United States was exercising its responsibility as the richest and most powerful nation in the world by taking the lead to legislate a ban of liquor. In fact, said the paper, "a few years of successful demonstration will put the whole world on a prohibition basis."  

The journal was blindsided by the juggernaut of protest, blatant public disregard, and crime that was provoked by the restriction on alcohol. It had prophesized that liquor would soon be "just one of the drugs down at the drug store, of interest only to physicians who are having medicines compounded..." Yet within a few years of its implementation, the editors were forced to the defense of the law in the face of unobstructed public protest. The journal argued that popular disapproval with Prohibition and the crime wave that was allegedly feeding off the demand for alcohol on the black market were relatively minor problems magnified by national and local media. Argued the Century, "If the people of this country were opposed to prohibition there would not be lacking a major political party which would boldly propose the repeal of the law." The journal jealously preserved its moral objections to alcohol over the course of the 1920s, standing fast until its editorial spirit grudgingly submitted to the factors of massive public
disapproval and the economic climate of the depression that led to the Eighteenth Amendment’s repeal.

While the journal wore its Prohibition colors on its collective sleeve, the extent to which its moral belief in the law had an impact upon its selection of newsworthy material and editorial topics was less apparent though equally striking. The Prohibition experiment and its societal offshoots provided much of the material from which “Jazz Age” myth has developed. Speakeasies, bootlegging and the Tommy gun-wielding thugs who oversaw the distribution of illegal beverages to the public easily embody the purported excesses of the era. In the Christian Century, however, coverage of the Prohibition issue, especially in the early years of the law’s existence, concentrated almost exclusively on its achievements rather than its detrimental side affects. For example, incredibly, the magazine did not even recognize the existence of bootlegging until 1925. Meanwhile, editors chose to publicize obscure international incidents that were seen as testaments to the necessity and intrinsic moral quality of Prohibition. One such editorial described the sinking of a German wine ship that led to rioting and drowning. This incident, said the paper, proved that even Germany’s moderate drinkers could not control themselves. That most editors lived and wrote in and around Chicago, arguably the center of illicit trafficking of alcohol (though New York was probably the biggest hotbed of raw anti-prohibition sentiment), yet neglected covering the wave of crime in the detail that it warranted, further illustrated how the journal’s moral agenda dictated its editorial policies. The objectivity and perspective that was so much a part of how the magazine handled many other social issues was neglected when it came to Prohibition.

The Century’s stubborn defense of Prohibition would never wane, though its editorial arguments became more dynamic between 1928 and 1932. As the presidential
election approached, the prohibition imperative competed with the problem related to presidential hopeful Al Smith’s Catholic affiliation for the top spot in the editorial columns of the journal. Pushed to decide which was the worst of two of its most hated evils, alcohol or the Papal church, the paper made a political choice that allowed for an avoidance of the touchier religious question. Defiant of the mounting wet contingency, the Century declared upon Hoover’s 1928 defeat of Smith, “On November 6 the American electorate held a referendum on prohibition!... The unprecedented vote given to Mr. Hoover leaves no doubt as to where the people stand.” 64 But what a difference four years would make. By the time of the election in ’32, the Century considered prohibition a “wash-out issue,” still very important to the nation’s moral standing though now overshadowed by the reality of the disastrous economic depression.65

In this period the paper’s support for the law would degenerate from one which was quite assured to a feeble, sophistic defense. The editorial staff, induced by the moral stigma attached to liquor, resorted to some of the most convoluted and hypocritical arguments founded in is columns.66 Editors toyed with the idea of supporting the “political dry,” who they suddenly viewed as a respectable person even if he promoted the prohibition legislation while drinking in the privacy of his own home. The paper implied that home distillation did not work against the liquor law because it was not a mechanism of organized distribution of alcohol. It put its stock in the Wickersham report, the brainchild of a federal team that was seen in the eyes of many as a contradictory and ambiguous document. The rationality of editors, normally a benchmark of their worldview, deteriorated along with their base of prohibition support. The lengths to which the Century would go to promote the dry platform was indicative of how much it valued the moral integrity of a dry country. When the last the battle between the wets and
drys had been waged and liquor was reinstated to its legal status, the Century despondently proclaimed that the defeat of prohibition was “a monumental tragedy and will entail vast moral loss.” 67

The paper did not stand alone in its stubborn defense of the legislation over the course of 1919-1932—the Protestant press endorsed prohibition almost unanimously. 68 This truth is particularly noteworthy when one considers that the Century, that bastion of theological liberalism, aligned with its enemy fundamentalists on what the journal considered the most important of societal issues. In itself, the journal’s record on prohibition is a powerful indication of the fluidity in ideologies that existed within the ranks of Protestants intellectuals, however polarized they have been depicted in previous scholarship.

Cultural Conservatism

Frederick Allen argues that a “Revolution in Morals and Manners” took place in the years that followed World War I. The Century substantiates the very idea that a cultural change was swiftly occurring for American youth and the popular ideas and institutions by which they were molded. The journal lamented that the “lofty ambitions and its high idealism” of the country’s youth competed with “the jazz music, shimmy and the movies in the presence of which the children of today are growing up.” 69

The Century both diagnosed and reacted to this change, particularly in a landmark editorial that bluntly begged the question, “Are College Girls Bad?” The journal, in all likelihood reacting to the disparaging remarks of more conservative counterparts within the religious press, made note of the cultural revolution in its midst but refrained from casting the change in a negative light: “We are going from an old world to a new... we
may trust human nature—in our girls as well as in our boys and grown-ups—to right itself upon its own keel.” 70 Change was never something to be feared by the Century—it was at the core of the social gospel agenda. More essential to the issue was whether this social dynamism jeopardized the moral standards used by the Century to measure society. Evidently, the most forward aesthetic symptoms of the sexual revolution, namely the introduction of the “bob” haircut and more radical forms of dress as additions to the popular feminine appearance, did not challenge the magazine’s dearest of moral codes. According to the Century, dress was a matter of customs rather than a reflection of individual morality, and furthermore, there were “more important things to worry about” than trends in women’s style. 71

Juxtaposed to the relative inconsequence that it attached to the changing face of the female in society, the Century’s attack on the entertainment industry was strikingly different, though not out of character for such a paper so grounded in religious moralism. Its frustration with the conspicuous flaws in the prohibition experiment, the last great Protestant initiative, contributed to the Century’s souring on other societal institutions. The journal sought targets other than the liquor distributors to blame for the shortcomings in society—the movies and periodical literature fit this bill. The editorial assault against mass, impersonal industries was the most effective initiative because they gave a recognizable face to social ills.

The journal’s crusade against the “filth” of movies, many forms of literature, and sports in the early 1920s was not yet resolutely pursued. By 1922 the paper was still ambivalent about the direction of the motion picture industry, admitting “its possibilities for both good and evil are practically limitless.” 72 But the journal did not hold back in its pejorative rhetoric—it even stooped to chastising the industry by way of uncharacteristic
gross generalizations—once it had target the movies: “Since time began men of unclean minds have tended to communize recreation and entertainment.” Even more respected forms of literature were not sheltered from criticism: “Too many writers of modern fiction get their inspiration from Bohemian London or Greenwich Village.” 73 Nowhere else was a generational gap more recognizable. The progressive impulse of the Century was checked by the editors’ hesitancy to embrace wholesale cultural change, even though the magazine was receptive to massive reforms in government and economic areas. The prospect of the waning cultural hegemony of the Protestant Church was responsible.

The Christian Century was so disturbed about the consequences of entertainment’s affects on the American moral conscience that it even debated censorship as a solution to the devastating problem. At one point, fed up with the scant progress that was being made, the paper seemed inclined to give its full endorsement of motion picture censorship, admitting that it preferred “clean movies makers to censors but do not fear censorship as much as they do film filth.” 74 Editors flirted with a means of federal control that downgraded the rights of individuals yet achieved the objective of curing the movie industry of its moral disease. On this point at least, the Century envisioned a definite dissolution of the tie between progressive and liberal protocol. Ultimately it decided that censorship was too dangerous a resolution that created as many problems as it solved.75 But it was clear, nonetheless, from the evolution of its editorial position on censorship, that even the most holy of liberal freedoms were not protected from the journal’s reach.

The popularity that boxing enjoyed in the United States was viewed with malevolence equal to that which the journal directed at the movie and magazine industries. However, the Century’s disdain for prize fighting fit more appropriately into
its editorial character than its appraisal of the latter cultural phenomenon—its
dependency on violence as a form of entertainment contrasted with the pacifist teaching
of Jesus which the paper so closely followed. The paper would not hold its tongue: “The
prize-fighting crowd is not a crowd of decent sportsmen... it wants to see blood and the
manifestation of murderous hate.” 76 The problem that the journal had with boxing is
more readily apparent when contrasted with its favorable opinion of baseball, which was
purportedly the “standard of clean and gentlemanly play.” 77 The pastoral quality of the
national pastime shielded it from the Century’s unforgiving analysis.

The Press

The Century viewed its cousins in the secular press with a critical and penetrating
eye. Editorials regularly complained about sensationalized news stories that appeared in
newspapers, particularly those based in Chicago. Among the magazines most prominent
targets were the Chicago Tribune and the William Randolph Hearst papers. On the
surface, criticism of the journalistic medium could appear to be a logical extension of the
journal’s editorial agenda on other issues. After all, the brunt of the Century’s attack
focused on how many newspapers overplayed the impact of liquor-related crimes and the
“wet” presence, as well as American nationalism, topics which correlated with two of the
journal’s greatest editorial endeavors, its support of prohibition and pacifism. These
issues, however, were not at the crux of the paper’s criticism.

An evolution occurred in Century’s handling of the secular press as the journal
slowly began to pay attention to the institution of the press itself rather than its subject
matter. The paper came to terms with the nature of press, admitting that “journalism is a
business. It buys and sells that commodity called ‘news.’ News is the report of some
departure from the routine of established order.” 78 After probing the problem of sensationalism in newspapers for years, the magazine came to a realization about how the press worked and appealed to its audience. The very essence of what was newsworthy for the press contradicted its moral objectives. Still, the journal abstained from criticism of journalists when it sensed the necessity of certain issues to be represented in print. Even in the depiction of Chicago’s crime problem, according to the paper the most blatant of the press’ misrepresentations, it retreated from its tough rhetoric upon realizing journalists were justified in their coverage. “It is hardly possible to over-sensationalize a situation such as this,” 79 admitted the Century in the late 1920s.

Education

The issue of religion in public schools, while it has been glossed over or entirely omitted in scholarly research on the Christian Century, is pertinent to an understanding of how editors consciously weighted religion in the context of modernity. Editors waged an open debate in the journal’s pages over the issue in the early ‘20s, in part responding to the Illinois Supreme Court decision to outlaw the teaching of the bible in public school. 80 The benefits and the drawbacks to biblical study in school were heeded. In the judgement of the Century, the moral rectitude of America’s school-attending youth competed with the issue of whether integrating religious classes into public school curriculum obeyed the “separation of church and state” stipulated in the U.S. constitution.

The journal had always seen the teaching of the bible as advantageous, but by the middle of the decade, it settled on accepting the practice as a legal element of public school education as well. The magazine’s approval of religion in public education found its origins in the assumption that religious devotion was the basis for morality. The paper
assessed, "It is a problem of producing graduates who will easily take their place among the vigorous moral and ethical guidelines of the community," and asserted that religion must make "a contribution to the solving of this problem." For the Century religion and individual morality were synonymous and inseparable. Those people who were devoted to some religious cause (preferably Protestantism, but some other religious sects could generally be tolerated) invariably developed a better internalized system of moral value, while agnostics, atheists, and religious nonpractioners were looked upon with wariness.

Because of the intrinsic moral quality of religious belief, the constitutional legality of religion in public school was marginalized to fit the journal's prevailing opinion. Editors at first brazenly claimed to "know" that the makers of the constitution did not view bible readings in school as "contrary to religious freedom," but eventually retracted, choosing a pragmatic approach. They pointed out that because there had been no problems in the cases where bible reading had been practiced, it could be a part of public education. The paper avoided touching on any legal aspect of the issue. The principle of separation of church and state, at the very core of the issue, was both secondary and peripheral—this indispensable American legal tradition was referred to only in passing in the form of what a contemporary analyst would call a "buzz word." A theological approach to public school biblical readings governed the Century's view because a greater collective morality, so intimately related to the bible, was its primary concern.

Tenets of Christian utilitarianism, an integral part of the magazine's blueprint for handling the United States' religious diversity, dictated how to deal with those individuals who were not accepting of biblical readings. The Century reasoned that Christianity is consistent with "American traditions" because of its status as the dominant
religious influence in society. The suggestion was made that parents could withdraw their children from classes that conflict with person religious ideas, explaining that “this plan would avoid all injustice, and it would register progress in the direction of an educational program more in harmony with the convictions of a large portion of the community.”

V. AFTERMATH AND CONCLUSION

The Religious Depression and a New Direction

There was no clean break that occurred when Roosevelt slipped into the office of the chief executive in 1933—the dates that govern the scope of this study are not meant to suggest a discrete change in the American psyche or for the Christian Century. It was in and around this time, however, that the paper’s formerly impregnable idealism became gradually tempered by the realities of massive depression. The national economic struggle engendered organizational as well as ideological problems in Mainline Protestantism. Churches of the traditional denominations faced a decline in membership totals and donations along with mounting debts. The Century sensed that the church was unprepared to handle human suffering on such a magnitude. In a painful admission in 1931, the paper somberly stated: “It is too late for the church to help to be more than a minor contributing factor to the working out of the issues of the present economic debacle.” The journal’s sanguine approach of the decade before had become dramatically moderated.

The residual impact of the depression felt in religious institutions compounded Protestant disenchantment with the country’s economic dilemma. By 1935 the Century had recognized that the period of depression had “brought forth no revival of religion.
We are accustomed to expect revivals in such periods." 88 One historian has noted the pattern of previous depression inspiring religious revivals because they remind people of the "need to let the spiritual dominate the materialistic order." 89 The Great Depression of the 1930s, on account of its incomparable economic implications and modernizing views about religion, may have severed this trend permanently.

The trend in the editorial approach of the Century during the depression away from its social gospel roots buttresses the predominant scholarly theory about the historical course of Mainline Protestant thought. It is widely accepted that Reinhold Neibuhr, the premier theological mind of his generation, ushered in an intellectual movement towards "Neo-orthodoxy," a more rational approach to religious theory rooted in realism. Neibuhr engineered a return to classical Christian tenets such as the sovereignty of God, the sinfulness of man, and the primacy of faith. 90 These conceptions were not readily apparent in the Century in the early '30s, but would later be revisited as religious thinkers began to formulate ideas that could explain American anguish.

The social gospel movement that was embodied by the magazine until depression-era suffering forced a revision of its convictions about human progress provides a valuable historical addendum to the work of the prewar Bull Moosers and Wilsonian progressives. The catalyst for reform was still alive and well in the journal's Chicago offices. Historian Eugene M. Tobin makes an important qualification about social progressives in the post-World War I twilight: "Independent progressivism remained a factor during the postwar era, but survival is not the same as success." 91 While its predecessors in reform were constituents of a watershed era of social action, the Century needed to compete with more entrenched feelings of complacency and indifference. The paper managed to do quite well in the midst of prevailing forces that were assuredly
running counter to its main objectives. Theologians seem to have been better prepared emotionally to weather the storm of postwar reevaluation, when even the most strong-willed were compelled to rethink their precious assumptions about the rationality of man and the inevitability of human progress.

The *Christian Century* in Context

The *liberal* tag assigned to the *Christian Century* by scholars relegated the journal to a relatively homogenous status. Clearly the journal was far more dynamic, more multifaceted, and more anomalous than has been suggested in previous literature. Only against the backdrop of theological fundamentalism did the paper definitively hold a more liberal set of ideals. *Liberal* and *progressive* are not interchangeable terms, especially when it comes to assessing the nature of the editorial opinions of the *Century*. The present day stigma attached to the liberal label prevents the two words from meaning one and the same. Progressivism is embodied by a sensitivity for reform. The *Christian Century* was surely a progressive journal that operated from a devoutly religious viewpoint. Social reform was unconditionally believed to be the key to better, more complete society. The *Century* was the functioning mouthpiece of religious progressivism in the post-WWI era, carrying on the tradition of antebellum political lobbyists and journalistic muckrakers. However, the call of liberalism, in its most essential form represented by rationality, tolerance, and the free exchange of ideas, was not an immutable component in the magazine’s editorial arsenal as many scholars have suggested.

The struggle that the *Century* went through during this era to develop some sort of overarching value system was symptomatic of a Protestant Church, and more
importantly, a nation, in ideological transition. The journal’s opinion on critical public issues in some cases embodied a static, even stubborn theological mindset totally divorced from open-mindedness and rationality. In many instances it reflected an approach that was constantly evolving and compensating for the changing cultural environment. The Century’s quest for an identity, and its tendency to contradict itself and struggle with a wide range of social problems, represented what was a very diverse and ambivalent American consciousness affected by both liberal and conservative impulses.
Notes

Part One

1 The *Christian Century* (hereafter designated "CC") 46: 1365.
2 CC 46: 1372.
3 Two doctor dissertations, by Theodore Hefley and Alfred Gobbel, are the only known works that cover the *Century* in depth. Other books on twentieth century Protestantism reference the journal with some frequency.
7 Ahlstrom, 777.
9 See bibliography for list of books by those authors.
11 For example, Douglas Jacobsen and William Vance Trollinger Jr. (ed.), *Re-Forming the Center: American Protestantism, 1900-Present*.
12 CC 101: 46.
14 CC 45: 1221.
15 CC 101: 45.
16 CC 35: 1187.
26 Gobbel, “The Editorial Policies and Positions of the *Christian Century*,” viii. While there is no data from 1919-1932, estimates can be made based on later demographic data.

Part Two

1 Hutchison, *Between the Times*, 262.
2 CC 35: 1187.
3 CC 40: 1187.
4 CC 37 (9/12): 9.
5 CC 37 (2/12): 4.
6 CC 40: 1187.
7 For example see CC 43 (2/11/26 issue) and CC 44: 843.
8 CC 40: 1030-1031.
9 CC 43: 278-279.
10 CC 40: 835-836.
11 CC 45: 367.
12 CC 43: 7-8.
13 CC 45: 786.
15 CC 49: 1294.
16 CC 49: 1263.
17 Goldberg, *Discontented America*, 41-42.
18 CC 38: 1284.
19 CC 37 (2/5): 5-6.
20 CC 42: 744.
21 Frederick Allen, *Only Yesterday*, 84-86.
22 CC 44: 613.
23 CC 44: 1060.
24 CC 43: 1352.
25 CC 44: 1060.
26 CC 43: 732.
27 CC 43: 245.
29 CC 43: 572.
30 See CC 40: 1092 and CC 44 (9/1 issue).
31 CC 39: 29.
33 CC 37 (7/8): 4-5.
34 CC 44: 11-25.
36 CC 44: 69.
38 CC 43: 175.
40 CC 40: 996.
41 CC 40: 1125.
42 CC 37 (6/7): 4-5.
43 CC 39: 422.
44 CC 42: 306.
45 CC 45: 1128.
46 CC 38 (3/17): 5.
47 CC 45: 4.
48 George Mardsen, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 184-188.
49 CC 42: 815.
50 For example see CC 39: 363-365.
51 CC 44: 100.
52 CC 45: 1221.
53 CC 44: 668.
54 CC 40: 840-841.
55 Hutchison, *Between the Times*, viii.
56 Allen, *Only Yesterday*, 245.
57 CC 37 (3/4): 5.
58 CC 40: 1281.
60 CC 38 (2/17): 5.
61 CC 40: 1462.
62 Hefley made this observation, which was confirmed by first-hand research.
63 CC 43: 908-909.
64 CC 45: 1388.
65 CC 49: 1368.
66 CC 49: 1408.
67 CC 52: 974-976.
72 CC 39: 740-741.
73 CC 37 (1/1): 7.
74 CC 43: 245.
75 CC 43: 956.
76 CC 45: 968.
77 CC 38 (10/14): 8.
78 CC 48: 263.
79 CC 45: 1217.
80 See articles by Cope and Avis in CC 37 (3/11 and 3/25 editions).
81 CC 41: 688.
83 CC 43: 500.
84 CC 41: 133.
85 CC 39: 518-519.
88 CC 52: 1168-1170.
Bibliography

Primary Source: The Christian Century

The Christian Century is a mass-produced, weekly magazine. The only articles in the journal that were mined for historical evidence for this study were those in the editorial section, on the reasonable premise that the articles would provide the most outward representation of opinion. Weekly sections other than editorial segment included “British Table Talk,” a forum for American and British religious thinkers; “Bookworld,” where staff members critiqued new literature on the market; “Correspondence,” a version of contemporary journalism’s “letter to the editor”; and “New of the Christian World,” in which the Century provided hard news reports from a multitude of denominations. Editorials usually comprised about half of the issue, with the remaining pages made up of the other news sections and sparingly few advertisements. One bound volume of the weekly paper (which spanned either January –June or July-December) on the average contained about 1,600 pages of printed material.

Those issues of the Century that appeared between 1919 and 1932 were researched for this project. In addition, retrospective articles that appeared in the journal in 1984 (the centennial anniversary of the paper) and in 2000 proved to be valuable sources, particularly in providing information about the unpublished papers of editor Charles Clayton Morrison, which were unavailable for first-hand study.

Opinion Articles:


Retrospective Articles:


**Published Secondary Sources**


*Journal Articles*


*Unpublished Dissertations*
