September 1995

Sarah Cleghorn and the Religious Left

Joan G. Schroeter

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Colby Quarterly, Volume 31, no.3, September 1995, p.214-227

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfkelly@colby.edu.
Sarah Cleghorn and the Religious Left

by JOAN G. SCHROETER

At the present time, America is witnessing the rise of a populist force in American politics known as the “religious right,” which is being directed by Christian evangelists through the popular media of television and radio. Though their message may be purveyed on programs with titles like the “Old Time Gospel Hour,” the content has become less the religion of the Christian Gospel than the politics of reaction.

This is not the first time, of course, that political influence has been sought by religious groups in America. On the contrary, religion has been bound up with the political life in America since the land was first settled by Europeans. A recent example of such religious influence—though one opposite to that of the “religious right”—dates from the beginning of the 20th century and in diminishing force continues to the present to affect the character of American life. Founding itself also on the Gospel of Jesus, this movement—which we may call the “religious left”—has borne fruit in the form of economic and social programs and legislation that have, ironically, raised the standard of living of the very segment of the population now so vocal in support of the “religious right.”

The “religious left” emerged from the clash between labor and capital in the last decades of the 19th century. During those decades, the nation’s economy was subjected to severe strains caused by increasing industrialization, urbanization, and immigration. In labor’s struggle to assert itself and achieve recognition of its value to the economic process, it found occasion to accuse the church of being more sympathetic to the capitalist than to the worker. Stung by these accusations, liberal church leaders began to study the implications of the teachings of Jesus on social and economic questions. The result was the rise of the “Social Gospel,” which reminded the American people that the fatherhood of God implied also the brotherhood of man and called for social and economic justice for all members of society. Under the influence of the “Social Gospel,” many were attracted to Socialism, while rejecting its doctrine of materialism and remaining true to Christian principles. These Christian Socialists were sorely tried in the period that followed World War I and the Russian Revolutions, when America suspected its institutions were under attack from the “left.”
AMONG THE VICTIMS of the Red Scare that followed World War I was the Vermont poet and novelist Sarah Cleghorn (1876-1959), who had become a Christian Socialist in 1913 and subsequently a pacifist in response to America's intervention in Mexican affairs on behalf of American oil interests. In her autobiography Threescore (1936) she comments on this evolution: "Reading Socialist books, of course, soon turns one against war" (Threescore 157). During World War I, Sarah was the only pacifist in Manchester, Vermont, where she proudly wore a homemade scarlet badge on which she had lettered "Love Your Enemies." There she distributed leaflets and wrote letters to public officials and national publications demanding the freeing of imprisoned conscientious objectors (Threescore 188).

While marching in the Socialist post-Armistice Day peace parade, Sarah intervened to stop the violent attacks on the marchers by men in khaki uniforms:

[I] ran over to them and seized one of them by the sleeve, without premeditation saying in ladylike tones "Please don't!" They hesitated and then turned back. I was rather thrilled to have been in the mêlée, small as it was. (Threescore 215)

Shortly thereafter, when on a visit to her brother and his family in Macon, Georgia, Sarah was called upon by an agent of the Department of Justice who had come, he said, because of a letter she had written to a New York newspaper "ridiculing the idea that Communists were enemies of society, and denouncing the persecution of them" (Threescore 222). When the agent requested her to give the names of the Communists whom she knew personally, Sarah refused, "asking the young man whether he really supposed I or anybody like me was going to assist his Department to throw our friends into jail?" (Threescore 222). Sarah spent the remainder of the interview trying to convince the young man of her own views and even provided him with a copy of the letter Francis Fisher Kane had sent to President Wilson on resigning in protest from the Justice Department. The agent's visit was followed up by "an enjoyable correspondence" with the Department in which she was requested to supply information "damaging to some radical or other"; Sarah wryly remarks that she regarded these inquiries as "a welcome opportunity to furnish the government with warm encomiums of friends and colleagues" (Threescore 223).

As a result of her unpopular opinions and associations, the three books she had written during the war years went unpublished: War Journal of a Pacifist, a small novel about a pacifist entitled Her Late Thirties, and a Children's First Life of the United States. The last of these is one of the first "alternative" American histories ever written to focus on social and cultural developments rather than the names and dates of political history; it includes chapters on the cruel and unjust treatment of the Amerindians; on the history of the Negro in the United States, especially the Underground Railroad; and on "the endless struggle between the worker and the owner for the fruits of industry" (Threescore 219).

The net effect of this publishers' boycott of her work was a change in the direction of Sarah's career. She became a teacher in private experimental
schools, first Brookwood and then Manumit, which had been established for the children of workers, remaining there from 1921 until 1932, except for a one-year stint at Vassar, 1929-30. She also worked briefly for The World Tomorrow, which described itself as “A Journal Looking toward a Social Order Based on the Religion of Jesus.”

With the help and guidance of her good friend Dorothy Canfield Fisher (1879-1958), she was able to find a publisher for her autobiography in 1936. This was followed by the work which represents the culmination of her thought on religious questions, The Seamless Robe: The Religion of Loving kindness (1945). Finally, Poems of Peace and Freedom (1945), with an introduction by Dorothy Canfield Fisher, was published by the New York State branch of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom.

Today the one poem for which she is most remembered is the often anthologized quatrain, which was written in 1913 and first appeared in F.P.A.’s column in The Tribune:

The golf links lie so near the mill
    That almost every day
The laboring children can look out
    And see the men at play. (Threescore 161)

The year 1912 had marked for Sarah an abrupt break with the style and subject of her former poems. While on a visit to the Medici Gardens in Rome with her Vermont friends Dorothy Canfield Fisher and Zephine Humphrey, the feelings of discontent with her failure to put her talents to a worthy social purpose came to a mystical climax, and she was able to make the conversion from her earlier work, which she refers to as “sunbonnets” because of their enchantment with the past, to her “burning poems” of social consciousness. The first of these, “Last Sunday,” calls upon Christians to correct the evils of society; it was published in the American Magazine, “almost the organ of the insurgents in Congress and in American life” edited by Ida Tarbell and Ray Stannard Baker (Threescore 146). This call to Christian action was followed by “Comrade Jesus,” published in Masses on Good Friday of 1914. With the last line reading “Comrade Jesus has his red card,” the poem can be seen as the ultimate sermon on the “Social Gospel.”

Some fifty years later, however, the relevance of the poem to contemporary religious and social discourse had been lost. In the 60s, William O’Neill, while selecting material from Masses for an anthology, consulted the opinion of Floyd Dell, one of the original editors of Masses. Dell wrote to him that he should not omit “Comrade Jesus” from the anthology—as O’Neill had planned—adding: “I myself find Sarah Cleghorn’s ‘Comrade Jesus’ a very moving poem, and I am astonished at your calling it ‘really atrocious stuff’ (NL: FD 2-46). As a result, in the introduction to the published anthology, O’Neill has toned down his aesthetic objections to the poem and refers to it simply as “curiously awkward” (O’Neill 19). Cary Nelson, on the other hand, has recognized the importance that Sarah’s revisionist view of Jesus had for the changing role of religion in the first decades of this century (Nelson 294-95). As effort continues to be made to
recover the neglected literary works of the past and to put them into their cultural context, the significance of Cleghorn’s work will undoubtedly be better understood.

II

The life of Sarah Cleghorn, described by Robert Frost as “Saint, poet—and reformer” (*Threescore* ix), is an interesting example of self-education and social transformation. She came from a traditional society with bourgeois values and genteel preoccupations, and yet she moved freely in radical circles where her sympathies and integrity won her a place of honor. In her mind there was clearly no opposition between mysticism and radical social action, and she expressly chose St. Francis as her model.

Though she was born in Wisconsin and lived part of her early life in Minnesota and her later life in Philadelphia, Vermont was always home to Sarah. Writing to fellow-Vermonter Dorothy Canfield Fisher on December 19, 1946, Sarah thanks Dorothy for the opportunity to work with her on the book about “our darling state” that was to become *Vermont Tradition* (1953), and remarks that even though she has come to love Philadelphia, “I turn Vermontward in thought always with joy as natural, (inherited too), as the marrow of our bones” (UVM: DCF 7-8).

When Sarah was nine years old and the family was living in Minneapolis, her mother, “the most undemonstrative member of an undemonstrative family,” died of pneumonia (*Threescore* 24). Her father, devastated by his wife’s death which followed the deaths of four of his children, and distrustful of his own ability to keep his remaining children alive, asked his wife’s sisters to take Sarah and her younger brother Carl back to their home in Manchester, Vermont. He remained in Minneapolis where he lived a solitary life in a boardinghouse, except for visits to his children twice a year. In her autobiography, Sarah writes lovingly about her father and the pleasure she took in his visits. The only clue that she may have suppressed negative feelings toward him seems to lie in a passage in which she speculates about the reasons for her neglect of her responsibilities as a daughter:

I don’t know how I can have grown up without ever contemplating the obvious idea of going out west and keeping house for him . . . . Or was my imagination, which I thought so warm and live, really sluggish, that I never dreamed my father might like his daughter by him in a home of his own? (*Threescore* 150)

In her autobiography written some fifty years after the fact, however, there is no hint of feelings of rejection as she recalls her arrival in Vermont. On the contrary, she writes:

Coming to Manchester was just coming home where our forbears the Hawleys and Purdys had lived for three and four generations. . . . it gradually dawned on me . . . that this Vermont, where we had come to live, was the very lap of beauty. (*Threescore* 32)

Sarah’s Aunts Fanny and Jessie cared for them with all the “potential of motherhood and parental tenderness and loyalty” (*Threescore* 27). In Manchester—
ter, where her aunts were social leaders in a tightly knit community, Sarah had what she describes as an idyllic youth. She remembers a social life consisting of a genteel round of tea parties, weekly games of whist, and dances at the Equinox House, the local resort hotel. Their "ancestral Episcopalianism" (Threescore 34) made them a religious minority in a Congregational community. Significantly, in terms of her own lifelong combat against injustice, Sarah's favorite hymn, which gave rise to her first "conscious sense of beauty," was "'The Son of God goes forth to war'" (Threescore 16).

Looking back on her early life in Threescore, Sarah reflects, not without a hint of regret:

My aunts certainly possessed a talent for keeping children young and carefree... like my brother, I was childishly free from any practice in real responsibility. Instead, we had a rockbound sense of security and permanence, seldom invaded by an inkling of the grown-up possibilities of life. (Threescore 87)

Sarah thus grew up ignorant of the economic pain and struggle in the world, except in one respect:

Of the organized battling for the oppressed that went on outside their ken and mine, the industrial conflicts towering up into calamities that would be famous for centuries, I never heard a word. The only organized effort of a humanitarian sort that entered our house—and in that regard we were beyond our acquaintances—was the protection of animals. (Threescore 90)

Aunt Jessie was the founder and secretary-treasurer of the local Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and under her influence Sarah became a confirmed anti-vivisectionist. All of her life she fought against scientific experimentation on animals as "an incurable treachery—it is (in the light of evolution) exploiting our poor relations" (Threescore 69).

As she approached adolescence, however, Sarah had two lonely coming-of-age experiences which helped to give to her life its direction. The first was a religious insight which came to her during a sleepless night: "When I was thirteen, I made my first theological discard—hell... As long as some living beings were in pain, everybody else would be too, even with a thousand golden sidewalks" (Threescore 52). Her second discovery advanced her education "by way of a horrible wound" (Threescore 58). In The Tribune she read an account of the "burning alive of a Negro by his white neighbors somewhere in the south"; her response was surprisingly violent:

It was now that I felt my first overwhelming onset of wonder and rage that the sufferings of the wicked could be so calmly contemplated by the people who were supposed to be good. Good! Why, they were not good at all—they were cruel! What other crime was half as bad as cruelty? (Threescore 59)

Sarah summarized her discovery of the "hateful malice of self-righteousness" with: "This was my painful graduation exercise from childhood" (Threescore 60). One may see these two recognitions, one following upon the other, as related; in the same way, the evolution of her religious ideas and her development into a social activist are also interdependent.

Having been reared in a religious tradition which included daily as well as
Sunday prayers, Sarah early formed the habit of contemplation. As she grew up, prayer continued to be “a vital resource of life. . . I felt the slow widening, deepening of inward life” (Threescore 136). From her friend Zephine Humphrey, Sarah learned of the mystics and found herself

in the presence of a new kind of beauty. . . . the God I found among the mystics was an infinite life, flowing through all forms like illumination, and readily reached at any time by any fragment of finite life, which it instantly lighted with divinity. Here was a God who was really different from man, though wonderfully and realistically inclusive of him. (Threescore 136)

As for religion, Sarah recognized it as consisting of “being beautifully useful and kind” (Threescore 136). But in this religion there could be no discrimination among recipients of kindness, and as a result the pale which she had increasingly observed between classes and races of people, between people and animals, would have to be torn down: “In religion there could be no Pale, no failures or waste material, and no preferred souls” (Threescore 136). For Sarah, approaching social problems from the viewpoint of religion went a long way toward solving them.

III

THE YEAR 1895 WAS AN important one in several ways for Sarah. She spent the school year at Radcliffe as a special student—all her father could afford in view of the fact that her brother was going to Princeton and on to medical school. She describes the writing standards of her teachers as very demanding: she received a grade of B in composition. Although she found Radcliffe helpful in increasing her literary knowledge, she missed student discussion. Moreover, “As for social challenges to the status quo, I never heard of them . . .” (Threescore 102).

Of greater significance than her Radcliffe experience was a friendship Sarah began in the same year. From it she would derive a sense of direction as well as unconditional support, spiritual and material, for the rest of her life. Sarah was introduced to Dorothy Canfield, who was on a summer visit from her home in Columbus, Ohio, to nearby Arlington where she had Canfield relatives. When Dorothy arrived in a percale dress, her hair in a pigtail, Sarah felt a surge of the feelings she always retained for Dorothy:

She came up to us with the natural est sweet frank pleasure I’d ever seen, and from her entrance I never took my eyes off her, or ceased to drink in the singular delightfulness of her presence. (Threescore 105)

In the decade that followed, Sarah and Dorothy saw one another only sporadically, either when Sarah visited New York, where Dorothy’s father had taken the position of Librarian at Columbia University and Dorothy was at work on her Ph.D., or when Dorothy visited the Canfields in Arlington. Sarah spent those years establishing herself as a writer of fiction and poetry and as a writer of letters to the editor on behalf of labor, the Negro, and the Audubon Society’s efforts to have the sale of egret feathers outlawed.

Sarah may have seen Dorothy’s marriage to John Fisher in 1907 as a threat to their relationship, but, because the young couple came to Arlington to settle
on a homestead they had received as a wedding present from the Canfield aunts, the two women’s friendship was instead assured. The distance of eight miles between Manchester and Arlington made them neighbors, with the opportunity to discuss their work with each other as often as they wished. The year 1907 also saw Dorothy’s first novel, *Gunhild*, published by Henry Holt, “who in the same year took my *Turnpike Lady*. Indeed it had been Dorothy who suggested my trying the Holts” (*Threescore* 130). As it was in this instance, Dorothy’s helping hand was to be extended to Sarah many times over in her later career.

Sarah’s attraction to Dorothy was that of a woman who found in another the model of what she herself aspired to be. Sarah describes their relationship in terms of a literary analogy, that of the friendship between Montaigne and Etienne de la Boétie which had inspired Montaigne’s essay “On Friendship”:

She [Dorothy] filled my two great hungers; my passion for inclusiveness, for downing all pales, and my intense desire to see life lived with amenity, with grace, in every direction. To her every creature seemed an object of respect, of concern, and of a pleasure to behold. And then, beside this double sense of fulfilment, her hopes and conceptions were endlessly enlarging to mine. There was a perpetual enkindling between us, which I can only describe by the exclamation of Montaigne, the final word in all friendships, I suppose, “And why did I love Etienne de la Boétie? Because it was he! Because it was I!” (*Threescore* 129-30)

Dorothy’s response to this conception of their friendship, which is reiterated in Sarah’s autobiographical novel *The Spinster* (1916), can be found in a letter she wrote to Sarah, after having spent all night reading her novel:

The lovely part of that historic friendship . . . is Montaigne’s feeling. Its like an everburning fire that generous ardor—and all the generations since have warmed their hands at the blaze. Think what it is to me to have such a fire of my very own, in my own life! (UVM: SNC 7—8)

As testimony to their friendship, Dorothy asked Sarah to be godmother to her daughter, to whom she gave Sarah’s name.

The differences between the life styles of the two women were several. Dorothy, in addition to her writing career, was firmly committed to her duties as wife and mother. Sarah, after having suffered an unrequited love for the founder of the Brookwood and Manumit schools, remained a “spinster,” sublimating her personal feelings in the “social passions” which became henceforth the “energisers” of her life (Miller 368). Dorothy’s earning capacity and literary connections were much greater than Sarah’s, and she often came to Sarah’s rescue by providing her with suggestions for literary projects or, in some instances, timely loans. For Dorothy, Arlington remained home, despite her travels; Sarah often had to live in boardinghouses away from Manchester in order to support herself, and finally retired far away from her beloved Vermont.

These differences in the circumstances of their lives were no more able to separate them, however, than the philosophical differences which early surfaced in their relationship. One of their differences concerned their attitude toward war, which the onset of World War I set in sharp relief. Sarah describes Dorothy as convinced that: “. . . war was a means of righting present wrongs, and preserving humanity’s faith in justice and the future” (*Threescore* 179). By 1916 Dorothy had made her decision to go to France and help the cause of “civiliza-
tion” by doing relief work while her husband joined the American Ambulance Corps. Sarah by the same time had made her decision for peace.

Nevertheless, as Dorothy was awaiting departure, the two women sat down together in the Seminary at Thetford, Vermont, and together they wrote what may well be considered an early feminist tract, Fellow Captains (1916). The work is structured like a Platonic dialogue with five participants, who include Dorothy and Sarah, and the subject under discussion is how to get control of one’s life by learning to deal with the problems of daily living. The title is followed by an epigraph, a quotation from “Sea-Fever” by John Masefield, whom Sarah had come to love and admire: “All I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by.” The ship serves as a metaphor for the soul, and in the work each of the participants learns how to become the captain of her own soul.

The dialogue opens with Sarah’s proposal that they use the technique of contemplative self-examination in order to get back to the foundations of their beliefs, an achievement which would bring them the serenity to confront life’s petty concerns. For Sarah, this foundation is “a God who is the whole universe, crimes and all” (Fellow Captains 39). For Emily, another of the participants, this foundation is also a personal God, but more like a father. For Mildred, it is the sense of beauty. For Anna, it is intellectual honesty. For Dorothy, this foundation is the recognition that “there is something in human nature far beyond the instincts to feed and propagate and possess.” This recognition becomes her definition of God:

... I think that God is the feeling in our hearts that makes us want to do what is right. I think when we want to be good to other people instead of tormenting or harming them, we have God in us. Goodness and bravery and unselfishness—those are other names for God. (Fellow Captains 42)

In this work, Dorothy’s essential humanism and Sarah’s mystical deism are shown in clear opposition, but it is Dorothy who has the last word. After rejecting the advice of “priests or theologians” as to how to steer the ship of the soul, she cheers her “fellow captains” on to a voyage toward independence:

After all, isn’t it the most exciting and absorbing occupation in the world, to be holding the tiller of your own bark! Here’s to you, fellow-captains! Here’s hoping for us all,

“A wet sheet and a flowing sea,
A wind that follows fast!” (Fellow Captains 93)

This work, the first of their literary collaborations to bear both of their names, continued to be the one they both returned to for their fondest memories.

Though neither on religious questions nor on questions of war and peace were the two women in accord, each honored the other’s opinion. In literary matters, each acted as a mentor and critic for the other, with Dorothy most often deferring to Sarah’s superior judgment on formal matters. On questions of social policy, Sarah and Dorothy most often thought alike, both having come under the influence of the “Social Gospel.” Dorothy, however, was not always prepared to go as far to the “left” as her friend. In her autobiographical novel The Spinster—a much-neglected bildungsroman—Dorothy appears as Sue Redwood, whose progressive social attitudes act as a catalyst on the nascent social consciousness...
of Sarah’s Ellen Graham. The work traces Ellen’s slow evolution from a girl with a genteel, provincial background into a young woman who seizes a banner reading “Workers of the World, Unite!” in a Socialist parade in New York. Sue Redwood and her husband have encouraged Ellen to read about Socialism, and though neither of the Redwoods is prepared to give up their individualism for membership in a mass movement, they congratulate Ellen when she obtains her red card.

Henry Holt published *The Spinster* in 1916. Not only did it sell better than *Turnpike Lady*, but it received favorable critical attention from William Dean Howells, who praised especially the last chapters, in which “the heroine—truly heroic—is seen turning from the egotism of our actual conditions to the altruism of the world as it shall be” (Howells 872). *Portraits and Protest*, a collection of both “sunbonnet” and “burning” poems including the famous quatrain, was published by Holt in 1917. In the *Atlantic Monthly* for December 1925, the anonymous contributor to “The Contributors’ Club,” after praising the work’s “skill of versification . . . and genuine and passionate thought,” wonders “what has become of the sweet songstress of Vermont villages?” (*Atlantic*, Dec. 1925). Of course, “the songstress” had been silenced for her political activity during World War I.

During the 20s, however, Sarah was preparing to break this silence by reviving an old poetic form, the ballad, and introducing new and revolutionary subject matter into it. Her ballads Sarah describes as growing “directly from the children, the Labor movement, and the war.” Speculating whether they can be truly called poems because they are “too galloping, rough, straight-ahead narratives,” she explains that “they don’t even try to gild the lily of the reckless brotherliness they celebrate” because she was mainly concerned “to kindle young imaginations with the fires and splendors of the heroes of Labor and lovingkindness; above all, the obscure ones” (*Threescore* 284). The first of these, “The Ballad of Gene Debs,” concentrates on the account of Debs’s trial for sedition on June 20, 1918. The ballad was published privately in 1928, with Sarah indicating on the flyleaf that she had asked for no copyright, and that “anybody is free to spread this ballad who likes” (*Threescore* 288). The same ballad was included along with “The True Ballad of Glorious Harriet Tubman,” “The True Ballad of the Camden Boy,” “The Ballad of Bon Masuri Day,” and “The Ballad of Tuzulutlan” in *Poems of Peace and Freedom* (1945). The last of these celebrates the humane behavior of Friar Bartolomé de Las Casas among the Indians of Mexico.

In 1930 Dorothy, who often shared writing projects with Sarah, partly in order to provide Sarah with supplementary income, passed on to her the responsibility for researching an article on Riverside, a new experimental prison for women in Rutland, Vermont, and its warden Lena Ross. She was, of course, aware of Sarah’s longstanding “revolt within against the whole penal system; against, in fact, the whole principle of punishment” (*Threescore* 196). As early as 1919, in a letter to the *Survey* entitled “The Feel of a Jail,” Sarah had appealed to readers to investigate unhealthful and demeaning conditions in prisons. She herself had
made it a practice to visit the county jail in Macon, Georgia, taking to the
prisoners fruit, writing materials, and, on one occasion, “two violets apiece . . . the
wild ones, the first of the year” (Threescore 201). Throughout the 20s, in popular
magazines and newspapers, in articles and letters, Sarah spoke out on behalf of
accused offenders who were too poor or too ignorant to defend themselves.

Sarah eventually mounted a concerted attack on capital punishment at the end
of the 20s, as she recounts in Threescore:
The largest of my puny efforts toward the penal revolution came . . . when I organized the committee
who tried to abolish the death penalty in Vermont. Dorothy and Zephine both served on this, and
Dorothy wrote a letter which we circulated widely, and not only we, but the national League [to
Abolish Capital Punishment] . . . but we lost our bill by a substantial majority. . . . (206)

The article “Miss Ross’ Girls” appeared in the Survey for August 1, 1931, and
bears both women’s names as authors. It is a description of a model institution
and a model director whose rule for treating her charges sounds much like the
Golden Rule: “I treat them [the prisoners] the way I’d like to be treated myself
if I had to come to a place like this” (431). Miss Ross’s penal philosophy, which
emphasized rehabilitation rather than retribution, was particularly appealing to
Sarah: “Humanizing conditions are the only ones that’ll make human beings”
(434).

Sarah’s interest in penal reform continued into the 30s when, despite her
impoverished circumstances, she regularly contributed to a fund for the relief of
chain gang prisoners. One of these prisoners, Angelo Herndon, with whom she
corresponded, had been imprisoned for “insurrection” under an old slavery law
when he attempted to organize the unemployed in Georgia. She also wrote letters
to the Public Health Service in Washington, inquiring into the health care given
these chain gang prisoners.

Inspiring Sarah’s interest in the plight of prisoners lay her general concern for
the Negro, the archetype of society’s imprisoned. In 1934 William Pickens, Field
Secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People,
wrote to Dorothy asking whether she would fund a prize for a nationwide essay
contest on “subjects concerning the history of the colored people and of the
Association,” the prize to be named “the Sarah N. Cleghorn Prize.” Dorothy
wrote to Sarah: “I’ve jumped at the chance, you’d better believe, of giving a prize
in your name—hurrah for the chance to do it!” (UVM: SNC 2-18). Sarah’s fight
against racism continued until the latter part of her life when, from the Quaker
retirement home in Philadelphia, she mounted a campaign to find justice for a
Negro veteran sentenced to life imprisonment for killing a white man in self-
defense.

The period of the Depression was a difficult one for Sarah. Plagued with ill-
health and burdened with the care of her Aunt Jessie, she had to resign from her
teaching position at Manumit in 1932. Her savings gone, Sarah was reduced to
dependence on an old Manchester friend, Molly Prentice Porter, for money for
“sundries and clothes . . . and health expenses.” As Sarah wrote to Dorothy on
March 17, 1934, explaining her need for a small loan, she could not ask Molly
for money to support her charitable activities since Molly did not “approve of my
radical affiliations” (UVM: DCF 7-8). Dorothy came to Sarah’s financial assistance in another way—by suggesting she write a dramatization of Understood Betsy, the popular children’s book Dorothy had written in 1916. The play was published by Harcourt, Brace, Dorothy’s publisher, in 1934. Later in the decade Dorothy proposed collaboration on a series of short stories for the American Unitarian Association. Nothing Ever Happens and How It Does was finally published, after a great deal of editorial wrangling, in 1940.

The Depression and her own precarious financial situation did not stop Sarah from involving herself in the Vermont marble strike of 1935-36. She joined with Dorothy in signing an open letter to “Our Fellow Vermonters” in the Rutland Daily Herald for December 12, 1935, asking for the formation of a committee to settle the strike and for relief for the strikers. Sarah was not content to write open letters, however, but became one of the sponsors—along with Malcolm Cowley, Archibald MacLeish, Lewis Mumford, among others—of the United Committee to Aid Vermont Marble Workers. Dorothy, on the other hand, deflected closer association with the strike by recommending to New Masses that they ask Sarah to write an article about it; Sarah’s rather factual account appeared on January 21, 1936. When approached by the United Committee for her support, Dorothy politely refused further involvement with an “organization of which I know so little as yours” (UVM: SNC 3-2). The Communist Party had taken up the cause of the striking workers, providing them with food and money, and Dorothy was not prepared to be associated with any group that far to the “left.” She did, however, send a generous donation to the union leadership. Despite the efforts of the United Committee, the strike dragged on until the end of July 1936; the workers gained a raise of only two and one-half cents an hour and were refused the demand for a closed shop.

The two women worked more closely together during the 30s in their efforts to preserve world peace. Dorothy had had time to rethink her interventionism in World War I. By 1930, when she published The Deepening Stream, she had come to realize that justice lay on neither side in that conflict, but rather that both had been used by the industrialists of the world to further their own profiteering ends. Sarah, of course, had never deviated from pacifism and was recognized as the local leader of the peace movement. In addition to their membership in the Bennington County branch of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (the only branch in Vermont) and their service on the national board, they both were active in a plethora of other peace groups. Increasingly, however, Dorothy realized that peace was not possible in the face of the rise of Fascism in Europe. As she turned her attention to helping refugees, Dorothy enlisted Sarah’s aid, especially in the Children’s Crusade for Children which raised $140,000 for the child victims of the Second World War. Sarah collaborated with Dorothy in the writing of a play, Liberty and Union (1940), to publicize the Crusade. Sarah’s own personal gift to the Crusade was a prayer addressed to “Almighty Loving-kindness,” asking Him to inspire charity in the hearts of the children to provide for “thy Holy Innocents, whose angels do always behold thy Face” (UVM: DCF 27-4).

In 1946 Sarah entered the Quaker retirement home in Philadelphia, a step that
was made easier by the fact that for years she had been lecturing in Quaker circles and had herself become a Friend. Thanks to the generosity of old friends like Dorothy and Zephine, and more distant acquaintances like the Communists Grace Hutchins and Anna Rochester, her financial situation was secure.

Despite the fact that Dorothy had lost her only son in World War II, she was persuaded by her “fellow captain” to work with her on behalf of the cause that Sarah had taken up as early as World War I, the plight of the conscientious objectors. Dorothy accepted the honorary chairmanship of the Committee for Amnesty for All Objectors to War and Conscription, of which Sarah was a member, but it was an uncongenial task. She resigned when her views clashed with the more militantly pacifist A. J. Muste, the active chairman, and after the Presidential Commission issued a disappointing partial amnesty. Thereafter, while Sarah maintained her strict pacifism, Dorothy worked for world peace through the United Nations.

**IV**

While Sarah worked actively for peace and justice in the world, she was also pursuing an inward journey that led her to reach some unorthodox conclusions about God and the universe. Before World War I she had become interested in the Emmanuel Movement, founded by Dr. Elwood Worcester, which Sarah describes as the “‘Episcopalian form of Christian Science’” and defines as “an attempt to revive the apostolic art of healing on a modern foundation of psychology” (Threescore 138). On the basis of these teachings, Sarah successfully applied the technique of auto-suggestion to cure herself of a chronic sinus problem. She remained convinced of the efficacy of this technique, and in 1937, as her brother lay dying of tuberculosis, Sarah wrote to Carl’s wife with the following advice:

> If you sit by his side when he’s asleep, and in an exceedingly low voice, but not a whisper, furnish him with the thought of health, of rest, comfort, easy breathing, refreshing sleep, invigorated waking—thinking the words intensely over to his mind and heart the while you say them—surprising results may follow. (UVM: SNC 4-4)

Sarah also read widely in the field of psychical research, including F. W. H. Myers’s *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (1903), the first significant work in this area. She also read with great interest Ouspensky’s *Tertium Organum* (1923), especially his discussion of “geometrical indications of a fourth dimension” (Threescore 259). These speculations bore fruit in the mystical insights she had following the death of the man whom she had silently loved:

> One day in our orchard the bare stone of grief yielded up its knowledge to me, and I could feel, with unmeasured joy, that life and death are one. It was something irrelevant to logic, but perfectly clear to the heart; an immemorial understanding that countless others must have reached. It was the humble, honest knowledge that by being good to the living we can reach the life of the dead . . . I saw that all loves are one love, and that this inclusive love is, as our hearts naturally understand, divine, eternal. Love certainly is God. (Threescore 293)
Sarah even succeeded in impressing Dorothy, who tended to be skeptical of psychic phenomena, with her faith in the continuing life of the spirit, as is apparent in this letter Dorothy wrote to Sarah after Carl’s death in 1938:

I lay awake a long time last night, enormously impressed by your half-suggestion that it is Carl’s spirit (in one of the thousand roads, reaching us) which is trying to reach you; and that this book with its magnificent core of truth, can only get itself really written by both your and Carl’s minds. (UVM: SNC 7-8)

Dorothy was referring to *The Seamless Robe* (1945), Sarah’s definitive religious statement.

Sarah sent the manuscript of this work to Dorothy in late 1942 for her comments and received a glowing response: “The book’s blue-and-golden sunniness is so all of one piece, it is like something organic—probably because you kept it so long by you” (UVM: SNC 6-1). Dorothy continued:

I read the chapter on evil with an especial intentness . . . and I’m enormously struck by the perfect simplicity with which you suggest an explanation of the problem which from Job on (and long before Job) has ground the human heart into the dust—how can “God” be all-powerful and all-good, and at the same time create (since he creates everything) evil. Your suggestion, that God—or loving-kindness—is not necessarily all-powerful is the simplest of solutions. Of course it is, like so much in your book, blessings on it, one of the most heretical of heresies . . . . (UVM: SNC 6-1)

Sarah’s hatred of war and its origins in the dictatorial power of the state seems to have inspired her revolutionary idea that God was not really omnipotent. At the same time, she rejected the idea that he had created cruelty and suffering only in order to turn them to His own loving purposes.

Can an attribute really belong to God which it corrupts man to emulate? Perhaps it is only a mistake of our intellect to suppose that imperial power in the realm of matter is anywise divine. (*The Seamless Robe* 132)

Yet Dorothy was not entirely content with what Sarah had to say about goodness. Very delicately she made this suggestion to Sarah:

And this reminds me to say (this really is a suggestion, or criticism) that I still feel this lack in the book—it seems to be self-centered in that every thought seems to be of doing good to others, out from oneself, not of putting oneself really in their place, and seeing how it would feel to be done good to. (UVM: SNC 6-1)

Dorothy’s idea was, on the contrary, that self-abnegation was really self-seeking because it left no opportunity for the recipient of goodness to do good himself.

Writing to Dorothy on December 31, 1949, Sarah defines her idea of goodness once again: “Goodness—(being good for something, and good to somebody—some life or lives) seems all: and usefulness a cardinal virtue more so even than honesty” (UVM: DCF 7-8). She continues with a description of her simple theology: “It seems to me that love is godlike,—and is our heart’s real God. Love & kindness are surely man’s real redeemer . . . I think of Jesus as a man, but one so aware of Lovingkindness & its preeminence, that it was easy to conceive of him . . . as divine” (UVM: DCF 7-8). Because they are stated thus naturally, the force of these statements that overturn the doctrinal developments of almost two
millennia is dissipated, and they have the ring of received truth.

At the end of her life, Sarah did not allow a knowledge of man’s capacity for self-destruction with atomic weapons to cause her despair. Instead, her conception of the divinity enabled her to hold fast to a belief in the future and the survival of life:

Believing Lovingkindness is the reality we personalize as a divinity, I have a strong sense of its great efforts to humanize and save Earth; and I think its power is illimitable whether a few years—or aeons—intervene. I think all trees, fields, & dwellings may perish, & all present life, but return to this planet in time, & be prospering on other planets in other systems meanwhile—or equivalents; saying in their ways, “a thousand years are but as yesterday . . .” (UVM: DCF 7-8)

The young girl who had disposed of hell had lived on to have a sweeping vision of eternity.

Works Cited


