



A Statement to My People on the Eve of War John Haynes Holmes (1917)

The United States entered World War I in April 1917. This decision was made primarily in response to German submarines attacking US merchant ships; additionally, US public opinion was inflamed by the discovery that Germany had offered to help Mexico reconquer the territory that, in the 1800s, had become Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona. On the day before the United States formally declared war, white Unitarian minister John Haynes Holmes preached the anti-war sermon excerpted here to his New York City congregation, Church of the Messiah. Several years earlier, Holmes had been a founding member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP); he would later head the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU).

Church of the Messiah published Holmes's sermon in at least four editions, thus giving it a wider audience. After the United States entered the war, Unitarian denominational leaders insisted that ministers support the war effort. Holmes resigned his membership in the denomination in protest, but his congregation retained him as their minister notwithstanding.

Tomorrow morning (April 2), there will assemble in the capital city of the nation the Congress of these United States, called together in special session by proclamation of the President, to consider matters of grave moment in the life of the Republic. This assemblage of the chosen representatives of our people promises to be the most fateful in our history. Unless events now unforeseen, unexpected, and, in the highest degree, improbable intervene, the Congress either will affirm that this country is in a state of war or will do the more formal and decisive thing of issuing a declaration of war against the Imperial German Government. [...] What this impending action of our government means, what consequences of triumph or disaster it will bring down upon us, to what ends of civilization or barbarism it will lead us, no man can say. [...] Nothing either in this country or in Europe will ever be the same again. What we bear or forebear in this coming week changes the currents of human destiny forever. [...]

On the morning of Sunday, March 7, 1915, I declared in this church my absolute and unalterable opposition to war. "War," I said, "is never justifiable at any time or under any circumstances [...]" These words, spoken in this place more than two years ago, I must reaffirm this day. [...] War is in open and utter violation of Christianity. If war is right, then Christianity is wrong, false, a lie. If Christianity is right, then war is wrong, false, a lie. The God revealed by Jesus, and by every great spiritual leader of the race, is no God of battles. He lifts no sword—he asks no sacrifice of blood. He is the Father of all men, Jew and Gentile, bond and free. His spirit is love, his rule is peace, his method of persuasion is forgiveness. His law, as interpreted and promulgated by the Nazarene, is "love one another," "resist not evil with evil," "forgive seventy times seven," "overcome evil with good," "love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you." Such a God and such a law, others may reconcile with war, if they can. I cannot—and what I cannot do, I will not profess to do. [...]

In its ultimate causes, this war is the natural product and expression of our unchristian civilization. Its armed men are grown from the dragon's teeth of secret diplomacy, imperialistic ambition, dynastic pride, greedy commercialism, economic exploitation at home and abroad. In

the sowing of these teeth, America has had her part; and it is therefore only proper, perhaps, that she should have her part also in the reaping of the dreadful harvest. In its more immediate causes, this war is the direct result of unwarrantable, cruel, but nonetheless inevitable interferences with our commercial relations with one group of the belligerents. Our participation in the war, therefore, like the war itself, is political and economic, not ethical, in its character. [...]

Once war is here, the churches will be called upon to enlist, as will every other social institution. Therefore would I make it plain that, so long as I am your minister, the Church of the Messiah will answer no military summons. Other pulpits may preach recruiting sermons; mine will not. [...] Other clergymen may pray to God for victory for our arms; I will not. In this church, if nowhere else in all America, the Germans will still be included in the family of God's children. No word of hatred shall be spoken against them—no evil fate shall be desired upon them.

[...] I will serve my country in war time by serving the ideals of democracy which constitute the soul and center of her being. War and democracy are incompatible. When war comes, democracy goes. [...] Already in our own country, before the beginning of war, the dread work of militarism is underway. Already freedom of thought is being denied, and liberty of conscience challenged. Already we are in the midst of such an orgy of bigotry, intolerance, and persecution for opinions' sake as America has not seen since the days of the Salem witches. The whole fabric of democracy is threatened, the priceless heritage of our fathers in peril of loss. America has never been in such danger as she is today—and the source of the danger is at home and not abroad. Hence [...] I will do what I can to safeguard free thought and free speech, by practicing both at any cost. I will do what I can to preserve liberty of conscience, by exercising that liberty without flinching. I will do what I can to guarantee to posterity the democratic ideals and institutions of America, by resisting to the death every assault made upon their bulwarks.

[...] I will serve my country at this time by preparing the way, so far as I am able, for the establishment of that peace which sooner or later must follow upon war. [...] Someday the bugles must sing truce across the fields of battle, tired warriors ground arms, and statesmen sit in guarded council halls to make an end to strife. And this end must be an arrangement by which Germans and English, Russians and Turks, must continue to live side by side in a common world; engage in the interchange of business, learning, and decent courtesy which make up an ordered life; and cooperate in the common service of the common interests of our one humanity. [...] For the consummation of this end, preparation is necessary, and it must be initiated without delay. To discover terms of reconciliation, to work out methods of cooperation, to soften hate and dispel suspicion, to spread abroad sweet influences of confidence and healing—this is a task as beneficent as it is prodigious. Before she herself became a belligerent, this was the task appointed, as by the fiat of God, for America. But now that she has cast away this sacred charge, it remains for us who cannot take up arms at her behest to keep it in her stead. How better can we serve our country than by restoring to her, or fulfilling for her, that high mission of peacemaking which is so uniquely and divinely hers!

Source: John Haynes Holmes, *A Statement to My People on the Eve of War*, 2nd ed. (New York: Church of Messiah, 1917), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.31175035184285>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy. A conjunction relocated within a phrase for improved parallelism. Spelling Americanized or modernized (mostly by closing up compound words). Punctuation emended for readability. The plural possessive, not singular, in the expression *opinions' sake* reproduces the usage of the source publication. The capitalizing of the governmental terms *President*, *Republic*, and *Imperial German Government*, but the lowercasing of divine pronouns, also replicates the source.

These edited excerpts from Holmes's sermon are intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



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