

# Contained? The Religious Life of George F. Kennan and Its Influence

❖ James C. Wallace

In the waning twilight of his singular life, the 98-year-old George F. Kennan labored over one last essay. Witten as a letter to his children, it expounded a subject that had engaged Kennan's erudite mind for the better part of a century: religion.<sup>1</sup>

The essay was not the transcendental musings of an aged mind grappling with death; rather, it was a systematic, comprehensive description of "the basis for my own present faith." Kennan had toiled over this particular writing task for almost a year. He confessed to his children "that never, in all my life as a writer and historian, have I ever confronted a harder task, nor one to the demands of which I felt less adequate."<sup>2</sup> Given his prodigious writing output, this is a consequential statement indeed.

Religion was not simply a private intellectual exercise for Kennan; it was a part of his life, to a lesser or greater degree, from childhood to his dying days. He attended church, prayed, wrote articles on religious subjects, grappled with the complexities of theology, and even served as a lay preacher. Moreover, these activities were not the closeted deeds of a private citizen; they were the deliberate engagements of the public George F. Kennan. He published articles about religious subjects while active in public service; he invited a leading clergyman and religious scholar, Reinhold Niebuhr, to be an adviser to the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, which Kennan established

---

1. George F. Kennan, "Religion Letter," 2002, in Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, George F. Kennan Papers, Box 78, Folder 7 (hereinafter referred to as "MML, Kennan Papers," with appropriate box and folder numbers). Kennan made clear that this essay was more than a mere letter: "But I want this letter to be something more than one long religious-autobiographical account. And thoughts and impressions related to the subject in question have continued to storm in upon me in such abundance and with such a rapidity, even in recent years, that if you asked me: what, at any given time, I fully believed, it would have been hard for me to give an instant response" (p. 3).

2. *Ibid.*

and directed; and he conducted religious worship services as a lay preacher while serving as U.S. ambassador to Yugoslavia from 1961 to 1963.

Therefore, it is puzzling and disappointing that this particular dimension of Kennan's life remains largely hidden in John Lewis Gaddis's masterful authorized biography, *George F. Kennan: An American Life*. Gaddis's tour de force has been widely and enthusiastically praised by renowned scholars and notable public intellectuals, and rightly so. Yet I must temper my applause because my task here is to provide a critical examination of the distinctive feature of Kennan's religious life and faith as portrayed by Gaddis.

In the epilogue of the book, Gaddis fleetingly describes Kennan as "a man of deep faith." Earlier, during his description of Kennan's ambassadorship to the Soviet Union, Gaddis tersely notes, "he was becoming deeply religious."<sup>3</sup> Yet these dabs of religious color, along with others spattered across Gaddis's 700-page literary canvass, are never fully brushed out and blended together to paint the full picture of Kennan's religious life and beliefs. Moreover, important dimensions and episodes of Kennan's religious life story are totally absent from the book, particularly his beliefs about the relationship between religion and world affairs.<sup>4</sup>

Why does Gaddis offer so little on this subject? One can only speculate about why an eminent historian such as Gaddis would fail to examine this highly significant dimension of Kennan's life, particularly given that relevant materials, both published and archival, are easily accessible.<sup>5</sup> In my interviews with Kennan's family members, they unequivocally depicted him as a "deeply religious" man.<sup>6</sup>

For whatever reason, Gaddis chose to deemphasize this facet of Kennan's

3. John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2011), pp. 454, 693.

4. Gaddis's sparse description of Kennan's religious life mirrors the story set forth in George F. Kennan, *Memoirs 1925–1950* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967); and George F. Kennan, *Memoirs II* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1972). Admittedly, in both of these volumes, the details Kennan offers about his religious life are meager. However, the larger body of material addressing various facets of Kennan's religious life can be found in several published books (*An American Family, Around the Cragged Hill, Sketches from a Life*), twelve published articles, twelve sermons and church talks, the "Religion Letter," correspondence with seminaries and religious leaders (e.g., Reinhold Niebuhr), and repeated discussions about spiritual and theological issues with John Lukacs as found in the published Kennan-Lukacs correspondence (*Through the History of the Cold War*). See George F. Kennan, *Sketches from a Life* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 1989); George F. Kennan, *Around the Cragged Hill: A Personal and Political Philosophy* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993); George F. Kennan, *An American Family: The Kennans—The First Three Generations* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000); and John Lukacs, *Through the History of the Cold War: The Correspondence of George F. Kennan and John Lukacs* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

5. Religion is not the only subject that Gaddis glosses over. Kennan's relationship to the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency and his involvement in covert operations receive equally limited description.

6. Interview with Joan Elisabeth Kennan, 17 February 2012, and subsequent correspondence in 2012 with her and with Grace Kennan Warnecke.

life. Granted, selectivity is a central part of the historian's task, as Gaddis reminds us in *The Landscape of History*—"it's the historian . . . who *selects* what's significant."<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, Gaddis's disregard of religious motifs gives the impression that this aspect of Kennan's life was not "significant," thereby depriving the reader of the multihued portraiture of Kennan that an authorized biography is supposed to present. There is more to this story than is found in Gaddis's book.

## Kennan's Religious Evolution

George Frost Kennan was born at the turn of the twentieth century into a devout Presbyterian home in Milwaukee, where his father and grandfather were "committed members" of Immanuel Presbyterian Church.<sup>8</sup> The children were regularly taken to Sunday school and occasionally to church services, but the dominant religious education in the Kennan family took place in the home. George's father rose every morning at 5:00 A.M. to read the Bible. He read through the entire text several times, but most often would be found reading his favorite book of the Bible—Job—a choice that George and other family members found to be somewhat morose.<sup>9</sup> This was a "straight-laced family" that allowed "no movies or card-playing on Sundays," no swearing, and no discussions of sex.<sup>10</sup> Yet, young George did not question his family's religious affiliations or beliefs.<sup>11</sup> In his later life, he highlighted a scene from his childhood to epitomize his faith:

So I will end this discussion only by a backward glimpse of a scene of my long-distant childhood. The second-floor bedrooms of our Milwaukee house then being occupied by more mature members of the family, I, as a little boy, was relegated for sleeping purposes, to a small and somewhat dreary room on the third floor. Its windows looked out over the roofs of a few more houses to the Milwaukee River, and on the further side of the river were the always busy railway sorting yards, so that all night you heard the whistles of the switch engines and the clicking of the freight cars being shunted from one track to another. And it was amid this ambiance that I, as a small boy, knelt down every evening beside my iron bed and directed to "Our Father who art in Heaven," the Lord's Prayer not

7. John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 22–23; emphasis in original.

8. Kennan, "Religion Letter," p. 1.

9. Ibid; Kennan, *Around the Cragged Hill*, p. 47; Interview with Joan Kennan.

10. Kennan, *An American Life*, pp. 7, 439.

11. Kennan, "Religion Letter," p. 1; and Kennan, *Around the Cragged Hill*, 47.

knowing then, as I do now, that most of the words were those suggested by Christ to his first disciples, when they asked him what a prayer was and what it should include.

While no doubt only dimly perceiving the meaning of the words he was pronouncing, the child, I am sure, never doubted that those words were part of a great and solemn mystery, unamenable of course to his understanding but deserving of his wonder, his awe, his deep respect, and his reverence. I cannot know how many of these reactions and perceptions of a kneeling child would be meaningful for sensitive adults of our present age? But I raise the question whether they would not still provide, in all their purity and power, a surer and more enduring foundation for religious faith than all the questionings and reasonings of the nine decades of conscious adulthood on my part that were destined to follow. And an affirmative response to that question would probably define better than anything else, I think, the nature of my own faith.<sup>12</sup>

Kennan in his youth was influenced in his passion for religion and education by two of his paternal ancestors, about whom he undoubtedly heard family stories from his grandfather, Thomas L. Kennan, the keeper and conveyer of the family history.<sup>13</sup> George's grandfather's grandfather, Thomas Kennan, was a deeply spiritual man and had an "active religious commitment" greater than all the "other male Kennans, both before his time and after it."<sup>14</sup> Thomas was the quintessential rural Presbyterian minister who pastored churches in Vermont and upstate New York. He was strongly influenced by the revivalist passions of the Great Awakening and theologically identified himself with the more liberal, non-traditionalist, ecumenical New School branch of Presbyterianism.<sup>15</sup> In *An American Family* and in his 2002 "Religion Letter," George F. Kennan goes to great lengths to explain the Old School (pro-Calvinist, anti-revivalist) and New School (pro-revivalist, pro-reform) Presbyterian split in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>16</sup> Kennan consistently champions the New School orientation of his family and himself:

In the first part of the 19th century, however, the entire American-Presbyterianism fell apart, dividing into the so-called Old and New Schools, the

---

12. Kennan, "Religion Letter," pp. 18–19. Kennan shared the same two paragraphs with Lukacs in a letter dated 11 February 2002. In the letter, Kennan refers to having shown Lukacs an earlier version of the "Religion Letter." See Lukacs, *Through the History of the Cold War*; pp. 253–254.

13. Kennan, *An American Family*. Kennan based this assiduously researched early family history on "a small and privately printed volume entitled *Genealogy of the Kennan Family*" written by George's "honored grandfather, Thomas Lathrop Kennan." See Lukacs, *Through the History of the Cold War*, pp. 91–92.

14. Kennan, *An American Family*, pp. 82–83.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 87–88, 113–121.

16. Kennan, *An American Family*, pp. 81–122. See also, D. G. Hart and Mark A. Noll, eds., *Dictionary*

former retaining, for the most part, the traditions of its Calvinist tradition, the latter rejecting them and acquiring a much more liberal complexion. . . .

The Milwaukee church to which my father and grandfather belonged was plainly of the liberal persuasion. And I myself, had I remained in Milwaukee and become a member of its congregation, would surely have been strongly of that inclination; for I have no hesitation in saying that I find some of the central elements of Calvin's teachings cruel, abhorrent, and wholly unacceptable.<sup>17</sup>

George's grandfather's father, Jairus Kennan, was "of all the members of these first three generations of the American branch of the Kennan family . . . the most remarkable and impressive person."<sup>18</sup> Although ordained as a Presbyterian minister, Jairus chose to teach at the University of Vermont. Sadly, his teaching career was cut short by an untimely death. However, Jairus's love of learning and his passion for teaching clearly affected young George. In Jairus, George found a kindred spirit and intellect with whom he could identify:

It remains clear that he, more than anyone else the family had produced to that time, was a person of serious scholarly tastes and capabilities, of wide intellectual interests, and of exceptional promise [as] an educator, perhaps also as a thinker of his time. . . . Jairus Kennan was not an ordinary man. He loved knowledge, and nothing could repress his ardor in the pursuit. His intellectual powers were of a high order, and he cultivated them with untiring devotion.<sup>19</sup>

Therefore, in the same way that George F. Kennan idolized and identified in foreign affairs with his namesake and distant relative George Kennan—the famed explorer of Russia in the late 1800s and adviser to President Theodore Roosevelt—he similarly idolized and identified with Thomas and Jairus Kennan in his passion for religion, education, and intellectual pursuits.<sup>20</sup> Young George's connection to his Presbyterian forebears shaped him throughout his life—as he made clear at age 88 in a letter to Anders Stephanson that addresses Kennan's favorable views of the Catholic Church: "My life and character are stamped by my Presbyterian origins; and respect for my forebears

*of the Presbyterian and Reformed Tradition in America* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), pp. 174–175, 180–181.

17. Kennan, "Religion Letter," p. 12.

18. Kennan, *An American Family*, pp. 85, 88–90.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

20. Gaddis, *Kennan*, pp. 11–12. Gaddis writes extensively about the connection and parallels between George F. Kennan and the elder George Kennan but not at all about the influence of Thomas Kennan or Jairus Kennan. In *Around the Cragged Hill*, George F. Kennan reiterates his religious connection with his ancestors: "I would attribute my own ethical values, for example, very prominently to the cultural-religious climate, inherited from long lines of Scottish and English ancestors, in which I was raised" (p. 52).

would, if nothing else did, make it hard for me to think of myself in any other way.”<sup>21</sup>

Throughout his life, even after he joined the Episcopal Church, Kennan identified himself religiously and theologically as a Presbyterian.<sup>22</sup> Gaddis inaccurately refers to Kennan as a “Calvinist,” a theological designation that Kennan would have vigorously rejected. Gaddis refers to Kennan’s “Calvinist upbringing” in characterizing his home life and to his “Calvinist guilt” in explaining George’s extramarital affairs.<sup>23</sup> Calvinism is the theological construct from which Presbyterianism originates, but the two are not congruent, particularly the New School variant in which Kennan was raised.

Kennan, while expressing appreciation for some of the doctrinal tenets of Calvinism, repeatedly and robustly disassociated himself from John Calvin and his teachings. In *An American Family*, Kennan rejects Calvin as “a sadly confused man, doing an endless and tortuous battle with the contradictions inherent in his own professed convictions. He was thus inclined to confuse, and did confuse, a great number of other people.”<sup>24</sup> While Kennan was ambassador to Yugoslavia in 1962, he preached a sermon on the problem of “original sin” in which he harshly contrasted Calvin’s views with those of Sigmund Freud, whom he concluded should be considered the better Christian:

Most of you are familiar, I am sure, with the gloomy and almost hopeless view of the human condition which was taken by John Calvin. . . .

There are not many today who would subscribe to the full rigor of this cruel and hopeless doctrine. Though born and bred a Presbyterian, I certainly could not do so. It is in fact to me incomprehensible how such a doctrine, denying any fate but the pangs of hell to the great majority of mankind, regardless of what efforts they might make to live in God’s way, could possibly be reconciled with the teachings of Christ.<sup>25</sup>

---

21. Lukacs, *Through the History of the Cold War*, pp. 214–215.

22. Annelise Kennan was raised a Lutheran and was very private about her faith, even with her own family. At least two of the children were christened as Lutherans—Grace and Joan—and Joan was later confirmed in the Episcopal Church. Interview with Joan Kennan.

23. “A New Look at the Man behind U.S. Cold War Policy” (transcript), *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, 7 December 2011; and Gaddis, *Kennan*, p. 596. Gaddis is not the only scholar to make this undifferentiated theological generalization about Calvinism. David Mayers speaks of “the family’s unrelieved Calvinist tradition” and “Calvinist fears of perdition.” David Mayers, *George Kennan and the Dilemmas of US Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 18. Kennan would sometimes use the theological designation “Puritan” to describe his home and upbringing (see also Gaddis, *Kennan*, pp. 59, 91, 94; and Kennan, *Memoirs 1925–1950*, p. 16). However, Kennan never refers to his home and upbringing as “Calvinist.” This is an erudite theological differentiation that serious Reformed theologians and scholars would affirm—Calvinism, Presbyterianism, and Puritanism are distinct theological constructs and not interchangeable.

24. Kennan, *An American Family*, p. 115.

25. Freud was Jewish. George F. Kennan, “Sermon (Palm Sunday), Protestant Church Group, Belgrade,” 1962, pp. 2–4, in MML, Kennan Papers, Box 302, Folder 27.

At Princeton University, the preeminent Presbyterian academic and theological institution of early twentieth-century America, a young, lonely, and socially outcast Kennan participated in mandatory religious services, although “I can’t recall any that had any particular effect on me.” His father worried about his church attendance and regularly encouraged his son not to neglect going to church. George, in his first bit of published prose, written for a Princeton student religious bulletin, argued that “it was idle to think of us students as being much affected by religious teachings at this stage of our lives. We were too healthy, too privileged, and too happy to have much awareness of the real significance of such teachings.”<sup>26</sup> Decades later, in a talk at Trinity Episcopal Church in Princeton, Kennan posed the question: “Is there a difference between faith in an elderly person and faith in a younger one?” He answered in the affirmative, suggesting that it is not because the older person fears death, but because the younger one has not fully come to grips with the “tragic dimension” of life, as well as the “incompleteness” of life marked by a “vulnerability to such things as pride, envy and jealousy, and above all, in our tendency to self-love and self-righteousness.”<sup>27</sup>

Gaddis appropriately observes that Kennan during his early years in the Foreign Service was “not a religious man” and had “drifted away from the church.” Kennan succumbed to the typical enticements for young professionals living abroad, which seduced him as well as many of his compatriots in the Foreign Service. Still cognizant of his religious upbringing, he reassured his sister, Jeannette, in a letter: “Prolonged and intimate association with the devil does not lie in the Kennan character.”<sup>28</sup>

Curiously, it was during these early, not-very-Presbyterian years in the Foreign Service that Kennan developed a deep passion for the Russian Orthodox Church through reading Fedor Dostoevsky, for whom “I had no great respect . . . as a novelist, and even less as a person,” but who “taught me something about the Russian church, and with it about religion generally.” Although never a convert to Russian Orthodoxy, Kennan developed an abiding affection for the church and its worship—the liturgy, the incense, the

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 1–2; Kennan, *Memoirs 1925–1950*, p. 17; Gaddis, *Kennan*, pp. 24, 30, 32; and John Lukacs, *George Kennan: A Study of Character* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 16–20.

27. George F. Kennan, “Perspective on Faith—Talk at Trinity Church Forum,” 1 May 1983, pp. 1–2, in MML, Kennan Papers, Box 308, Folder 7.

28. Gaddis, *Kennan*, pp. 58–59, 440; and Interview with Joan Kennan. In *Through the History of the Cold War*, Kennan tells Lukacs: “You were also kind enough to mention character. I had never thought of myself as having much of it—rather, as being in many respects a weak sort of person. True: I don’t steal. I try to be kind to people. I view loyalty as perhaps the only absolute virtue. And I should be ashamed to be found lacking in intellectual honesty. But I have done many foolish and inconsiderate things in my time. My ability to contend with the devil that lies somewhere inside the human male animal has been, I suspect, less than average. Altogether, I shall have a good deal to answer for when my time comes.” Lukacs, *Through the History of the Cold War*, p. 95.

emotion-filled music, the passion, the *magnum mysterium*—which offered an enticing alternative to the often dry, sterile worship of the Presbyterian Church. He occasionally attended Russian Orthodox Church services during his postings in Russia. In reflecting on those times, Kennan remarked: “If I ask myself who were at that time, and actually through all the remaining years of my service in Russia, my most effective teachers in the field of religion? I can only say that they were, ironically, none other than the Soviet communists themselves.” For it was the efforts of the Communists to subvert and supplant the genuine Orthodox religion with a shallow imitation that “brought home to me how deep was my own need for, and dependence upon, the majesty and mystery of the Christian Church in giving meaning and solemnity to such occasions.”<sup>29</sup>

To Kennan’s astonishment, the “Long Telegram” of 22 February 1946 “changed my career and my life.” The document encapsulated ideas about Soviet Communism and the nascent Cold War that had been simmering in his heart and mind for years.<sup>30</sup> Intriguingly, Kennan states in his *Memoirs* that he composed the “Long Telegram” “like an eighteenth-century Protestant sermon.” Why would he choose this ecclesiastical metaphor to describe the celebrated document? Was he familiar with Protestant sermons? Yes. Was he knowledgeable about the eighteenth-century sermons of his great-great-grandfather Thomas Kennan and his other Presbyterian forebears? Very likely. Was he preaching to the Washington establishment? Most definitely: “Here was a case where nothing but the whole truth would do. They had asked for it. Now, by God, they would have it.”<sup>31</sup> Here is, perhaps, early evidence of an avocation that Kennan later publicly practiced—that of a lay preacher.<sup>32</sup>

The religious conjunctions within the “Long Telegram” extend beyond this one brief reflexive metaphor. In the fourth part of the document, Kennan indicates how he expects the Soviet Union to act on an “unofficial” and “subterranean” plane to promote Communism and subvert its enemies. Among

29. Kennan, “Religion Letter,” p. 2; Interview with Joan Kennan; and Gaddis, *Kennan*, pp. 51, 53, 150. See also Arthur Link’s observations on Kennan and the Russian Orthodox Church in Gaddis, *Kennan*, pp. 440–441. Kennan gave two lengthy talks to religious audiences about the Russian Orthodox Church, Christianity in Russia, and the convergence of religion and Russian nationalism. See George F. Kennan, “Christianity in Russia—Talk at Men’s Club, First Presbyterian Church,” 13 January 1955, in MML, Kennan Papers, Box 300, Folder 38; and George F. Kennan, “The Russian Orthodox Church—Talk at Trinity Church Forum,” 12 January 1992, in MML, Kennan Papers, Box 311, Folder 2. See also the “Religion in Russia” chapter in George F. Kennan, *At a Century’s Ending* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996).

30. Kennan, *Memoirs 1925–1950*, pp. 292–295; and Gaddis, *Kennan*, pp. 215–222.

31. Kennan, *Memoirs 1925–1950*, p. 293.

32. Gaddis briefly mentions Kennan’s activities as a lay preacher. He also mentions a comment by a Milwaukee minister who said to Kennan after hearing him speak in his hometown, “Boy, you missed your calling.” See Gaddis, *Kennan*, pp. 238, 492–494.

the “national associations or bodies” that the Soviet authorities will attempt to penetrate, Kennan highlights “religious societies.” He singles out the “Russian Orthodox Church, with its foreign branches, and through it the Eastern Orthodox Church in general” as objects for Soviet expropriation and manipulation. Moreover, in foreign countries, where Communists were working toward the destruction “of all forms of personal independence, economic, political or moral,” the Communist agitators will target “all those who exercise local leadership or have local prestige, such as popular local clergymen or political figures.” These clergymen and political leaders will be “anathema” to the Communists, Kennan declared, employing the evocative New Testament word meaning “under a curse” or “marked for destruction.”<sup>33</sup>

A year-and-a-half later, *Foreign Affairs* published the pseudonymous “X” article in which Kennan expanded on the themes and ideas set forth in the classified “Long Telegram.” The article affirmed that “we have in Russia today a population that is physically and spiritually tired” as a result of the death, destruction, and exhaustion of a half century of war. Yet, according to Kennan, the Russians’ zeal for the church had not waned, as evidenced by enthusiastic church attendance during the war. He argued that to win the ideological battle with Communism, the United States must create “a spiritual vitality capable of holding its own among the major ideological currents of the time.” He closed the “X” article with an expression of gratitude to Providence for giving the United States the opportunity to prove itself a superior nation:

Surely, there was never a fairer test of national quality than this. In the light of these circumstances, the thoughtful observer of Russian-American relations will find no cause for complaint in the Kremlin’s challenge to American society. He will rather experience a certain gratitude to a Providence which, by providing the American people with this implacable challenge, has made their entire security as a nation dependent on their pulling themselves together and accepting the responsibilities of moral and political leadership that history plainly intended them to bear.<sup>34</sup>

Kennan might have been speaking generically and not religiously in using the terms “spiritual” and “moral,” but given his background and his previous statements in the “Long Telegram,” that seems unlikely.

When Kennan returned to Washington, DC in late 1946 to take up a post at the State Department, he settled for the first time into a somewhat

33. George F. Kennan, “Telegram to the Secretary of State, Washington—The Long Telegram,” 22 February 1946, in MML, Kennan Papers, Box 163, Folder 45; and “Anathema,” in *Greek Dictionary of the New American Standard Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1998).

34. “X” [George F. Kennan], “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (July 1947), pp. 566–582.

normal routine with his young family, as Gaddis details.<sup>35</sup> However, unlike the majority of Americans caught up in the religious wave in the United States in the late 1940s and 1950s, the Kennan family as a whole seldom attended church services during their time in Washington, although Grace, the eldest of the four children, did become very active in a Congregational Church youth group.<sup>36</sup> Only once, on Easter, did the whole family get dressed up and make the trek to Sunday church services, according to Kennan's daughter Joan:

When we were living in Washington as a child, I remember going to church once. It was on Easter Sunday, and something must have gotten into my parents that they decided that this would be a nice thing to do on Easter—to take the family to church. And I think I remember it because it was so unusual.<sup>37</sup>

Only after the family moved to Princeton and joined the Episcopal Church did George regularly attend church services. Annelise attended with him only on occasion. In the Kennan home, Annelise provided a limited measure of religious training as she engaged in simple prayers with her children each night at bedtime and taught them to memorize the Lord's Prayer. However, neither George nor Annelise discussed religion much with their children in these early years. Only later did it become a topic of more open conversation in the Kennan household.<sup>38</sup>

During Kennan's time as director of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, he invited the most renowned U.S. theologian of religion, ethics, and foreign policy, Reinhold Niebuhr, to advise the staff in discussions about the future of Europe and Asia. Kennan later claimed that Niebuhr did not have a discernible impact on specific public policies.<sup>39</sup> But where Niebuhr

35. Gaddis, *Kennan*, pp. 246–248.

36. In correspondence I had with Grace Kennan Warnecke, she said she went through a “very religious phase” from 1947 to 1950 when the Kennans were living in Washington, DC. Grace was confirmed as a Congregationalist during this time. Grace discusses more of her family's and her father's religious life in her forthcoming memoir. For details on the postwar religious boom, see Jonathan P. Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America's Religious Battle against Communism in the Early Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 167–173; and Robert S. Ellwood, *The Fifties Spiritual Marketplace: American Religion in a Decade of Conflict* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), pp. 1–21.

37. Interview with Joan Kennan.

38. *Ibid.*

39. Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 238; Mayers, *George Kennan and the Dilemmas of US Foreign Policy*, p. 149; and Gaddis, *Kennan*, pp. 360–361. The Policy Planning Staff solicited the views of a wide range of academics, business leaders, and government experts, including those of “near-Olympian stature” such as Walter Bedell Smith, J. Robert Oppenheimer, and Hans Morgenthau. One of the members of the Policy Planning Staff was Dorothy Fosdick, daughter of Harry Emerson Fosdick, the eminent pastor of Riverside Church in New York City, and niece of Raymond Fosdick, who ran the Rockefeller Foundation for three decades. Dorothy was an intimate family friend of the Niebuhr family and a great admirer of

did have a significant impact was on Kennan's thinking about morality and ethics more broadly and its role in international affairs. From Kennan's earliest reading of Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, he held Niebuhr in the highest regard and frequently spoke about his admiration for the great theologian and his ideas. The two men corresponded regularly and kept abreast of each other's consequential writings and speeches.<sup>40</sup>

After Niebuhr's death in 1971, Kennan was asked to voice the official tribute at the gathering of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. At this august gathering, with Niebuhr's widow, Ursula, present, Kennan declared, "I regarded him during his lifetime, and continue to do so, as the greatest of my own teachers—as the man whose thought and example have exerted the greatest influence on my own view of life." In a private letter of thanks written a couple of weeks later, Ursula told Kennan: "I must tell you that Reinhold's enormous respect for you and your knowledge was combined with [a] very warm personal regard for you." According to the letter, Niebuhr repeatedly remarked of Kennan, "There is no one I feel more compatible with."<sup>41</sup> Kennan's high regard for Niebuhr was shared by Annelise, who recalled several times to her children how wonderfully Niebuhr had treated her and what great respect he had shown her in a conversation at a dinner party in Washington, DC, where they were seated together. Annelise never forgot Niebuhr's kindness.<sup>42</sup>

Niebuhr's admiration for Kennan was one of the reasons that Niebuhr requested a year's sabbatical at the Institute for Advanced Study in 1958. Niebuhr was working on a manuscript for a new book, *The Structure of Nations and Empires*, and he urgently wanted Kennan's critical input. During the first part of that year, Kennan was teaching at Oxford University, so Kennan loaned Niebuhr his office at the institute with its view "of the quiet fields and woods in the distance," as well as the expert services of Kennan's personal secretary, Dorothy Hessman.<sup>43</sup>

A few years later, when Kennan was serving at ambassador to Yugoslavia, he preached a Sunday sermon to the Protestant Church group in Belgrade highlighting Niebuhr's theology. In the sermon, he expounded Niebuhr's

Reinhold Niebuhr. Before advising the Policy Planning Staff, Niebuhr had been invited to participate in a government-sponsored tour of postwar Germany in 1946 and subsequently to advise the State Department's Advisory Commission on Cultural Policy in the Occupied Territories.

40. George F. Kennan, "Reinhold Niebuhr Correspondence," 1954–1972, in MML, Kennan Papers, Box 34, Folder 3.

41. *Ibid.* In the letter from Ursula to Kennan, she gives a unique glimpse at Niebuhr's inner psyche: "As you know, Reinhold never regarded himself as an intellectual or a scholar, and he was really quite nervous when he first went to the Institute for that wonderful year."

42. Interview with Joan Kennan. The encounter between Niebuhr and Annelise Kennan is also referenced in a letter from Niebuhr to George Kennan, 25 February 1958, as having occurred "years ago in Washington." See Kennan, "Reinhold Niebuhr Correspondence."

43. Kennan, "Reinhold Niebuhr Correspondence."

views on the imperfectibility of man, a theme that often recurred in Kennan's own writings and speeches, as well as on the dangers of absolute power:

Nobody, Niebuhr feels, is always entirely right. Nobody can be sure of the entire correctness of his own views. But we are safest when it is possible for human opinions and human pretensions to be challenged openly and to become the subject of public debate. For out of these conflicts of error one is able to distill a sort of practical philosophy of daily life which at least saves us from the most horrible of errors and the most intolerable of human ambitions.

In accordance with this outlook, Niebuhr rejects above all every form of utopian philosophy or political movement, and indeed every political outlook which pretends that man can produce paradise on earth through his own efforts.<sup>44</sup>

Kennan preached several sermons and led worship services "on the Embassy premises" while ambassador in Belgrade from 1961 to 1963. He also led the funeral service "for a suddenly and tragically deceased small child of one staff member," something he confessed was one of the hardest things he ever had to do.<sup>45</sup> Over a period of 40 years, from 1953 to 1993, Kennan gave many sermons and talks to First Presbyterian Church in Princeton, Trinity Episcopal Church in Princeton, Princeton University Chapel, the Belgrade Protestant Church group, and churches small and large in rural Pennsylvania and New York City, as well as to religious student groups. Some of these presentations were later published in journals and magazines from *The Atlantic Monthly* to *Christianity and Crisis*. Although never inclined to embrace the ecclesiastical profession, Kennan enjoyed the opportunity and challenge of the pulpit, his daughter Joan recalls:

I think that, he liked to give lectures; he liked to give talks. And he was comfortable doing that. And, of course, a great deal of thought went into whatever it was he was going to be talking about. He would write it out and he would think about it a lot. And since this was something that was a part of him that he thought about, I think he enjoyed the opportunity sometimes to express that in a format like [the pulpit]. I mean to be a lay preacher is comfortable because you

---

44. George F. Kennan, "Sermon—Protestant Church Group, Belgrade," 17 March 1963, in MML, Kennan Papers, Box 302, Folder 32.

45. Kennan, "Religion Letter," pp. 2–3; and Joan Kennan, correspondence with James C. Wallace. In a sermon preached at the Belgrade Legation on 1 October 1961, Kennan expressed his feelings of inadequacy at serving as a lay preacher while ambassador: "It seems to me that it is always a questionable procedure for a layman to speak to other laymen from the pulpit, out of the depths of his own imperfections, and to try and give them any sort of advice on Christian ethics. In the present instance, this seems to me particularly unacceptable; for some of you have no choice but to put up with my tutelage on the official level during the weekdays, and for me to come along on Sunday and claim the authority of lecturing you on matters of conscience as well would be wholly intolerable." George F. Kennan, "Sermon—Protestant Church Group Service, Belgrade," 1 October 1961, p. 1, in MML, Kennan Papers, Box 302, Folder 24.

are not actually a minister; you don't have to be up there saying things a minister would say. But you can still talk about the faith from your own perspective. And I think he rather liked that. It was important to him.<sup>46</sup>

Kennan's Christian faith was orthodox, yet with some non-orthodox elements. "I regard myself, if anyone wants to know, as a Christian, although there are certainly others who would question my right to that status."<sup>47</sup> In *Around the Cragged Hill*, in the "Religion Letter," and in sermons such as "To Be or Not to Be a Christian," Kennan details the specifics of his faith in a manner resembling a classic systematic theology. He also engaged in deep spiritual and theological discussions with his good friend John Lukacs, a Catholic, with whom he carried on a 52-year correspondence.<sup>48</sup>

Regarding Jesus Christ, Kennan wrestled with Jesus's divine-human nature as portrayed in the Gospels—historical source materials that Kennan found to be "sorely deficient"—as well as Jesus's conviction that he was the Son of God. Kennan marveled at the statement of John 1:14, "And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth," which Kennan considered "one of the most beautiful sentences in the English language." In spite of his doubts about the historical validity of the Gospel accounts, Kennan placed his faith in Jesus Christ: "What [Christ] asked for was faith: and I am glad to give it. . . . For the belief in this man I need, then, no historical evidence or explication. Faith suffices."<sup>49</sup>

Regarding God, he embraced the concept of a loving, caring, merciful God, although he had some "discomfort" with God "as a figure in human form," as well as an "exclusively masculine" image of God. He preferred to combine the concept of God with that of the Holy Spirit, embracing the "majesty and mystery" of both concepts. He rejected the idea of God as the

46. Interview with Joan Kennan. See also Kennan's thoughts on being a lay preacher in George F. Kennan, "To Be or Not to Be a Christian," 18 October 1953, in MML, Kennan Papers, Box 253, Folder 7.

47. Kennan, *Around the Cragged Hill*, p. 40. In the "Religion Letter" Kennan reiterates his claim to faith: "I regard myself as a Christian. And this is not just for formalistic reasons. Yes, of course: I was born into a Christian family and social entourage. I was duly baptized in a Christian church. I have endeavored to describe, in some of the above pages, what became of that commitment in later years. But these are not the deepest reasons why I consider myself and feel myself a Christian" (p. 18).

48. Lukacs, *Through the History of the Cold War*. The entire Kennan-Lukacs correspondence remains in Lukacs's private library. Only a select portion was published in *Through the History of the Cold War*. In letter of 8 July 1984 to Lukacs from Kennan, Lukacs notes: "Readers may now find that from now on an increasing number of our letters became addressed to spiritual matters (rather than to intellectual) and to theological (rather than epistemological) matters" (p. 94).

49. Kennan, *Around the Cragged Hill*, pp. 40–42; Kennan, "Religion Letter," pp. 3–8; and Gaddis, *Kennan*, p. 20.

Primary Cause of creation because of the resultant cruel and capricious environment in which human life is obliged to exist: “For I have great difficulty in reconciling the figure of the almighty God, the presumed creator of our universe, with that of the supposedly loving and benevolent God to whom we are taught to pray.” Moreover, Kennan believed that God limited his almightiness and did not intervene in human affairs and thus could not be blamed for the tragic consequences of life, which are “explicable only as what we concede to be chance.” Yet Kennan affirms, “For I do believe that there is another plane of reality . . . where God is indeed supreme.” Ultimately, Kennan’s dualistic view of God reflected his belief in a dichotomy between the physical and spiritual natures of mankind.<sup>50</sup>

Regarding the church, Kennan held organized religion in high regard, echoing the values of his father. However, unlike his father and ancestors, he valued non-Presbyterian sects equally. He saw “greatness” in different elements of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Episcopal Church, and even Judaism. Kennan appreciated the need that “the vast majority of believers” had for a collective “manifestation of faith.” He did not regard himself as “above” this need and welcomed “the chance to affirm my faith among numbers of others.” Nevertheless, Kennan saw “the problem of religious faith” for himself as “essentially an individual one: the effort of a single man to establish his relationship to forces beyond the reach of his own rational perceptions.”<sup>51</sup>

Regarding ethics, Kennan’s realist predisposition led him to assert that ethical values and virtues were primarily individualistic and the byproduct of cultural and religious conditioning. “To me there are no such things as abstract and universally applicable rules of ethics.” This belief shaped Kennan’s views about morality in foreign policy. He saw the moral obligations and commitments of governments as inherently different from those of the individual, thereby making foreign policy intrinsically amoral.<sup>52</sup>

Other theological ideas that Kennan systematically explored include original sin, the imperfectibility of man, the nature of the soul, cosmology, and the teachings of St. Paul. Kennan pondered deeply as he wrestled with complex theological and philosophical concepts. He grappled with the religious writings of St. Augustine, Calvin, Niebuhr, and others. Unfortunately,

50. Kennan, *Around the Cragged Hill*, pp. 42–48; Kennan, “Religion Letter,” pp. 15–18; Interview with Joan Kennan; and Lukacs, *Through the History of the Cold War*, pp. 96–97, 252–253.

51. Kennan, *Around the Cragged Hill*, pp. 48–51.

52. *Ibid.*, pp. 51–52; and George F. Kennan, “Morality and Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (Winter 1985/86), pp. 205–218.

Gaddis's treatment of Kennan's theological insights is superficial and displays a lack of theological aptitude.<sup>53</sup>

## Kennan on Morality and Foreign Policy

Kennan's name is most often associated with U.S. foreign policy and international affairs, which are the main focus of Gaddis's authorized biography. Therefore, it is perplexing that Gaddis, in his meager discussion of Kennan's religious and theological views, does not highlight Kennan's views on morality, ethics, and world affairs.

In a 1959 article published in *The Atlantic Monthly* titled "Foreign Policy and Christian Conscience," Kennan addresses Christian responsibility in international affairs.<sup>54</sup> He maintains that Christians will have great difficulty judging a government's purposes in foreign affairs because decisions are complex and are not always executed along a clear cause-and-effect axis:

I can testify from personal experience that not only can one never know, when one takes a far-reaching decision in foreign policy, precisely what the consequences are going to be, but almost never do these consequences fully coincide with what one intended or expected. . . . And if [the statesman] himself finds it hard to judge the consequences of his acts, how can the individual Christian onlooker judge them?

It is more appropriate, Kennan suggests, for the individual to judge a government's methods, not its purposes. He warns against religiously-based American exceptionalism in terms that are surprisingly apropos for today's U.S. foreign affairs:

While Christian values often are involved in the issues of American conflict with Soviet power, we cannot conclude that everything we want automatically reflects the purpose of God and everything the Russians want reflects the purposes of the devil. The pattern is complex, fuzzy, and unstable. We must look sharply at each individual issue before we jump to conclusions.

53. Gaddis, *Kennan*, pp. 658–687. If one reads Kennan's systematic theological statements, particularly in *Around the Cragged Hill*, the "Religion Letter," and various sermons, and compares them with statements on pages 658–687 of Gaddis's book, one finds an evident lack of congruence. Evidently, Gaddis's primary preoccupation with Kennan's theology is to use Kennan's thoughts on original sin and the imperfection of man to buttress his thesis about Kennan's preoccupation with sex and possible religiously-induced guilt.

54. George F. Kennan, "Foreign Policy and Christian Conscience," *The Atlantic*, Vol. 203, No. 5 (May 1959), pp. 44–49. The article was reprinted in booklet form as the anchor for a literary symposium with five respondents. *Foreign Policy and Christian Conscience—A Symposium* (Philadelphia: National Peace Literature Service of the American Friends Service Committee, November 1959).

Similarly, in a letter to Lukacs, Kennan pointedly notes that “the country as it stands today . . . is not the product of any moral decisions; it is the product of the infinitely complex workings of history.”<sup>55</sup>

Moreover, in the *Atlantic Monthly* article, Kennan denounces colonialism, arguing from a positive religious point of view that “self-determination . . . is a Christian purpose.” Conversely, when discussing the United Nations, Kennan asserts that the sovereign nation state with all its patriotism and chauvinism “has no foundation in Christian principle,” but equally “there is no particular Christian sanctity lent to decisions taken in the United Nations.” Kennan saw three areas in which it was appropriate for Christians and other people of faith to take a moral stand: the question of war, nuclear testing, and weapons of mass destruction.<sup>56</sup>

In July 1959, Kennan wrote an expanded version of *The Atlantic* article for Princeton Theological Seminary’s preeminent academic journal, *Theology Today*. In “World Problems in Christian Perspective,” Kennan mirrors the outline of his original *Atlantic* article but augments his arguments with additional illustrations and applications. Central to his thesis is his fundamental view of the relationship between church and state. Government, according to Kennan, is an institution created “to assure order and justice internally and to provide for the common defense.” Therefore, “it is difficult to read into either of these needs . . . a clear Christian content.” Further, Kennan argues, the laws of secular society “never entirely coincide” with the Ten Commandments, and “even in the areas where they do coincide, the reasons for their adoption and the purposes they are intended to serve are different from the reasons and purposes of God.” In sum, Kennan maintains that people of faith should have a democratic voice in the U.S. government—though no more than non-religious people—but that the U.S. government is not founded on religious principles, and its purposes and obligations are distinct from those of religious groups.<sup>57</sup>

Referring to morality in foreign policy, Kennan consistently affirmed his view that morality and ethics are individual attributes and not applicable to governments: “I regard the role of government as something irrelevant to Christian ethics, and greatly dislike seeing the exercise of worldly power (and foreign policy is only a part of this) masked as a spiritual purpose.”<sup>58</sup> In a 1985 article in *Foreign Affairs* appropriately titled “Morality and Foreign Pol-

---

55. Lukacs, *Through the History of the Cold War*, p. 116.

56. Kennan, “Foreign Policy and Christian Conscience,” pp. 44–49.

57. George F. Kennan, “World Problems in Christian Perspective,” *Theology Today*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (July 1959), pp. 155–172.

58. Lukacs, *Through the History of the Cold War*, p. 18.

icy,” Kennan argues that “moralism” in foreign policy is inappropriate and counterproductive because (1) the basic roles and responsibilities of governments have “no moral quality,” (2) there are no international standards of morality to which governments can appeal, (3) governments often champion one standard of behavior for others while hypocritically practicing a contradictory standard at home, and (4) moral initiatives in foreign affairs are often generated domestically by influential minority elements within a state who have some special interest in the foreign situation in question.<sup>59</sup> Regrettably, in making these arguments, particularly the second, Kennan does not address the treaty obligations of the International Bill of Human Rights or the increasingly cited principle of the “responsibility to protect.”<sup>60</sup> He does recognize that moral principles have a role to play in foreign affairs, both positive and negative, but he concludes that moral judgments are of relevance “primarily in our own behavior, not in our judgment of others.”<sup>61</sup>

Kennan’s most recognizable and abiding contribution to U.S. foreign policy is the concept of containment, which he first articulated in the “X” article: “In these circumstances it is clear that the main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies.”<sup>62</sup> Kennan’s concept of containment did not arise *ex nihilo*. In *An American Life*, Gaddis comprehensively traces the arc of Kennan’s evolutionary thought regarding containment. However, one stream of explication that Gaddis regrettably does not probe is the possible correlation between the concept of containment and Kennan’s religious views. This correlation relates to a dimension of Kennan’s life that Gaddis does explore in some depth—his struggle with his sexual urges, his affairs, and his consequent feelings of remorse and guilt.<sup>63</sup>

59. Kennan, “Morality and Foreign Policy,” pp. 206–210.

60. The International Bill of Human Rights consists of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

61. Kennan, “Morality and Foreign Policy,” p. 217.

62. “X,” “The Sources of Soviet Conduct”; and Kennan, *Memoirs 1925–1950*, pp. 363–364.

63. Gaddis, *Kennan*, pp. 140–141, 595–602; and John Lewis Gaddis, *We Know Now: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 37–39. Joan Kennan provides a very personal insight into how her father’s inner conflicts impacted the Kennan family life: “There are so many references in various books, biographies of my father, things that have been written about him, about how morose and sort of moody and melancholy and things he was. And I’m sure that was true internally at times when he would be discouraged about something. But I do know that from a family perspective, he was always very, very himself within the family and always totally accessible. He was never sort of a moody thing where he would go off into his study and you couldn’t disturb him and you know that type of thing. He would always seem to be cheerful. I mean sometimes he would be exasperated of course, unhappy with what was going on with the world. He would often get very overwhelmed by some of his obligations, but that’s a separate kind of issue. Some of those were kind of normal. He would feel that he was too over-programmed; he had too much to do and things. So we

Kennan was anguished through much of his adult life by the contradiction between his inner, physical urges and his spiritual and covenantal commitment to his wife, to his family, and to his faith. His assessment, candidly articulated in *Around the Cragged Hill*, was that “man is a cracked vessel” filled with “contradictions” that “often cause one part of his personality to be the enemy of another” and renders him “never fully able to overcome, individually or collectively, the fissures between his own physical and spiritual natures.” Kennan’s conclusion was blunt: “Man is not perfectible.”<sup>64</sup>

Therefore, because this “demonic side of human nature” cannot be destroyed and should not be appeased, it must be contained.<sup>65</sup> Only by such self-containment could the spiritual power of one’s soul blossom to offer the possibility of a meaningful and successful life. This conceptualization of self-restraint is congruent with the New School Presbyterian theological interpretation of sin, as well as with Kennan’s foreign policy ideas about “self-restraint” and “self-containment.”<sup>66</sup>

In a 1987 article in *Foreign Affairs*, Kennan reflects on “Containment: 40 Years Later.” In the article he maintains that his original idea of containment could be expanded to include “many other sources” in this “imperfect world which needs to be contained,” including the arms race, “wildly destructive religious fundamentalism,” terrorism, environmental disasters, economic excesses, and much more. In a more individual application of the concept of containment, Kennan opines: “It could, in fact, be said that the first thing we Americans need to learn to contain is, in some ways, ourselves”—a truth he had painfully learned many years earlier.<sup>67</sup>

Even though Kennan’s writings about containment focused on the Soviet Union, his application of containment to the personal plane raises the possi-

could hear him get, when he would get sort of mad about all that and exasperated. I never thought of him as being a moody person and in that he would sort of go off by himself and you wouldn’t want to talk to him while he was ‘in a bad mood.’ He wasn’t that type of a parent.” Joan Kennan, interview.

64. Kennan, *Around the Cragged Hill*, pp. 27–30.

65. *Ibid.*, p. 30. Gaddis speaks of the “third way” of containment between the extremes of war, on the one hand, and capitulation or appeasement on the other. See John Lewis Gaddis, interview by Joanne J. Myers, “George F. Kennan: An American Life,” 15 November 2011, <http://www.carnegiecouncil.org/studio/multimedia/20111115b/index.html>.

66. See explanations and discussions of the New School Presbyterian theological interpretation of “neo-orthodoxy” championed by Karl Barth, H. Richard Niebuhr, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Princeton Theological Seminary’s John Alexander Mackay in David Voskuil, “Neoorthodoxy,” in David F. Wells, ed., *Reformed Theology in America: A History of its Modern Development* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), pp. 247–260; Gabriel Fackre, “Reinhold Niebuhr,” in Wells, ed., *Reformed Theology in America*, pp. 261–277; and Malcolm Reid, “H. Richard Niebuhr,” in Wells, ed., *Reformed Theology in America*, pp. 278–298. See also Donald K. McKim, “Neo-Orthodoxy,” in Hart and Noll, eds., *Dictionary of the Presbyterian and Reformed Tradition in America*, pp. 167–168; and Gaddis, *Kennan*, pp. 278, 494–495.

67. George F. Kennan, “Containment: 40 Years Later,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 65, No. 4 (Spring 1987), pp. 827–833.

bility, indeed the probability, of a correlation—perhaps not causal but certainly influential—between Kennan’s religious provenance and his Cold War metaphor of containment. Kennan’s religious belief was the fertile soil in which his nascent hypothesis of containment ultimately germinated and grew.<sup>68</sup>

## The Book’s Lacuna

Some skeptics and Realpolitik devotees might argue that I have made too much of the private religious life of Kennan. In reality, there is much more to this story than space allows me to describe here.

Besides many of Kennan’s own writings cited in this essay, there is an abundance of material on Kennan’s religious thought and practice buried in the Lukacs correspondence, in Kennan’s written diaries, and presumably in Kennan’s dream diaries, which Gaddis tells us are in his private possession. The dream diaries, according to Gaddis, reveal that Kennan sometimes heard “the voices of dead parents and departed friends” in his dreams.<sup>69</sup> But what of plausible dreams about the transcendental—God, angels, demons, heaven, hell, religious ancestors, and religious heroes? Did these common religious images ever materialize in Kennan’s dreams? If so, what did Kennan record about them? How did he interpret them? Is this not germane to a holistic understanding of Kennan’s life?

The story of Kennan’s religious life and beliefs is essential to perfecting our understanding of this American icon, as well as the Cold War foreign policy he helped to shape. Four lessons can be extrapolated from the larger Kennan religious narrative in juxtaposition to Gaddis’s scant treatment of the topic. First, inherent religious influences are important in shaping the thoughts of great thinkers. They should not be treated lightly. Second, the religious nature and milieu of the Cold War merits greater consideration—and has rightly been receiving more substantive examination in recent years.<sup>70</sup> Third, the role of religion in shaping international affairs must be taken seri-

68. It is curious that Gaddis, in his detailed explanation of containment in the “X” article, chooses to use a religious simile to characterize the Soviet Union’s position: “Like the church, the Kremlin could afford to wait.” Gaddis, *Kennan*, p. 260.

69. *Ibid.*, p. 686.

70. See Andrew Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012); William Inboden, *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945–1960: The Soul of Containment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Jonathan P. Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America’s Religious Battle against Communism in the Early Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); and T. Jeremy Gunn, *Spiritual Weapons: The Cold War and the Forging of an American National Religion* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2009).

ously by scholars and practitioners alike, not merely because of the global rise of religious fundamentalism, but because, as Madeline Albright and Daniel Philpott persuasively argue, the significance of religious and cultural influences has been too long ignored in U.S. foreign policy formulation, to the country's detriment.<sup>71</sup> Finally, correctly interpreting the agency of religion and culture in foreign affairs begs a cross-disciplinary approach to scholarship that not only recognizes the "interdependency of variables," but also validates the relevance of the metaphysical, religious, and theological.<sup>72</sup>

Kennan, near the end of his extraordinary life, struggled to explain—in a final letter to his children—the scope and depth of his religious life. Somewhat timorously, he concluded, "My own faith is a subject on which perhaps the least written, the better."<sup>73</sup> Yet, Kennan himself was by far the most prolific chronicler of his religious experience. Unwittingly perhaps, he hints of an important story here, one that pleads to be understood in all its fullness. Should it be contained or unleashed? Ideally the latter, thus permitting posterity to gain a full-dimensional, multihued portrait of the architect of containment.

---

71. Madeline Albright, *The Mighty and the Almighty: Reflections on America, God, and World Affairs* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006); and Daniel Philpott, "The Challenge of September 11 to Secularism in International Relations," *World Politics*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (October 2002), pp. 66–95.

72. Gaddis, *The Landscape of History*, pp. 53–70. Some historians are working to increase the interdisciplinary understanding of history, religion and theology, and foreign affairs; for example, The Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations and the 7th International Conference in American Political History co-sponsored by Boston University; Clare College, Cambridge University; and Princeton University.

73. Kennan, "Religion Letter," p. 18.