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Hemingway's Religious Influences in the Writing of A Farewell to Arms

Kimberlee McMillin and John Fenstermaker
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Introduction
In A Farewell to Arms, Catherine Barkley’s life addresses the dominant question in Hemingway’s work: “How does one discover in a world of destabilized values and traditions the way to live now?” Catherine maintained conservative Christian beliefs until her fiancé was blown “to bits” in World War I. Following his death, feeling guilty that religion had caused her to withhold full expression of their love, Catherine finds the genuinely spiritual - foregoing her earlier religious training, even at the hour of her death - in sacrificing all by commitment emotionally to loving Frederic Henry, the novel’s initially jaded and opportunistic protagonist. The religious motif here, rare in Hemingway, centers the “love” and “war” threads - and focuses our research.

Censorship of A Farewell to Arms
The American Library Association finds that the most frequent challenges to A Farewell to Arms draw from among “sex and debauchery, violent deaths and senseless brutality, and belief in a universe indifferent to human suffering.” The latter category reflects on religion and the spiritual.

Materials and Methods
A Farewell to Arms has been challenged, censored, and banned at various times, beginning with its second monthly installment in Scribner’s Magazine, June 1929. The popular conception that the novel is irreligious is particularly unfounded. Our research explores/explodes this misconception by examining the role of the spiritual in the novel, drawing from a broad context that includes: Hemingway biography; his letters, with scholars’ commentary, from volumes 1-3 (1907-1929) of the Cambridge Edition of The Letters of Ernest Hemingway; and criticism ranging from initial reviews to later scholarly assessments (see below, “Works Cited”).

Works Cited

Hemingway and Religion
Childhood: strong Congregationalist background; his father was a youth leader in Agassiz movement (focused on the presence/purpose of Divinity as seen in the natural world); his mother directed youth church orchestra and composed/published religious music; Hemingway was a leader in church youth club activities.

Married/Divorced/Remarried: his first (Protestant) marriage was to Hadley Richardson in 1921; divorced 1927; married Pauline Pfeiffer in 1927 in a Catholic ceremony, where his battlefield baptism was accepted; the Pfeiffer family was staunchly Catholic.

Additional Catholic religious/cultural focus after 1924: he enjoyed the Spanish bullfight tradition and frequently traveled to Spain. These latter biographical details specifically contribute to the background writing of A Farewell to Arms (3/1928-1/1929).

Continued Research
I am currently applying for a research grant to continue my research this summer, analyzing primary and secondary sources for Hemingway’s religious influences throughout the writing of A Farewell to Arms. This research will take place at Florida State University.

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Dr. Fenstermaker will continue his research throughout the summer and present his findings at the 2016 International Hemingway Conference in Oak Park, Illinois.