

The Social Gospel of Nicholas Comfort

*By Bob Cottrell**

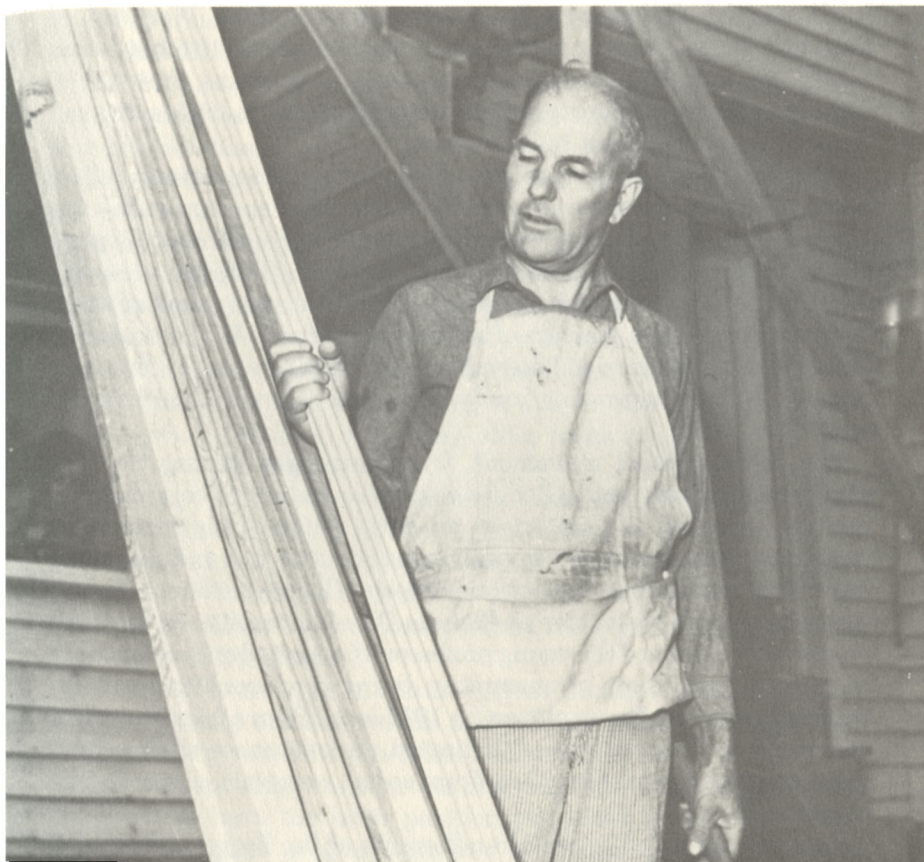
Nick was always in trouble of some kind . . .
Lord how he used to speak up . . . He was
brimming over with Godly mischief. It
would be a mistake to say that Nick was
brave . . . he simply was not afraid of any-
thing.

Ken Lowe, 1961

At one point during the 1930s, members of the Ku Klux Klan, attired in their white robes, ventured near the University of Oklahoma campus in Norman. Directly across from the educational institution, they left their infamous brand, a fiery cross. Shortly thereafter, Nicholas Comfort, Presbyterian minister and Dean of the Oklahoma School of Religion, drove with a friend to Oklahoma City to talk with the state leader, or Grand Dragon of the KKK. Seated near the Klan chieftain, Comfort simply informed him that the actions of the hooded organization were wrong, and that even had they been proper, "he had no authority to behave the way he did." The churchman and his compatriot left after the ten minute encounter.¹

The man who challenged the KKK because of strong personal and religious convictions, Nicholas Comfort, was an individual who became embroiled in the political and social affairs of the University of Oklahoma and the state of Oklahoma for over three decades. Comfort continually spoke out on controversial issues involving the liberties of political dissidents, the civil rights of racial minorities, economic inequality, and American militarism. Because of his writings and other activities, he was condemned as a "red," subjected to bitter criticism, and investigated by the House Un-American Activities

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Nicholas Comfort, an outspoken Presbyterian minister who applied his strong commitments to the leading issues of the inter-war period (Courtesy Western History Collections).

Committee and a state legislative inquiry seeking to ferret out Communism in Oklahoma public schools. Comfort also was a much defended man, admired by many in the Norman community and throughout Oklahoma for his "great personal integrity," "moral courage," "great generosity and sympathy," and uncompromising advocacy of deeply-held principles.²

Born in Brookston, Texas, on May 1, 1884, to a family of tenant farmers, this latter-day religious rebel grew up in an atmosphere of impoverishment. Young Nicholas's mother died shortly after his

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birth, and his father was frequently mired in debt. Working on plantations until he was seventeen, Nicholas moved with his father to Oklahoma in 1901. Boasting few material possessions, they staked a claim to land near Lawton. Because of his parent's illness, the son cleared the acreage and built a house.³

Plugging away at a series of jobs, Nicholas had obtained only a first grade education by his twenty-first birthday. But encouraged by the example of a young Indian woman who had returned from college to aid her people, Nick Comfort went back to school. He began a lengthy process of education which culminated with the attainment of three degrees, including a masters of science in theology. While studying, Comfort met and married Estern Ellen Oke of Whitehouse, Ohio, and helped to support a growing family through teaching and ministerial work.⁴

The Social Gospel movement, which emerged during the late nineteenth century and called for clergymen to help to correct societal ills, appealed to Comfort at an early stage of his career. An indication of his propensity to challenge the status quo and champion underdogs, paralleling the actions of Social Gospel leaders, occurred while he was an instructor at Kansas City University. In 1912 his employers bemoaned the young professor's purported encouragement of student complaints of unsanitary living conditions and his unwillingness to be a "team player." A 1917 letter from a friend jokingly addressed to "Dear Heretic," indicated an awareness of Comfort's belief that the church should confront social, economic, and religious questions.⁵

Pacifism appealed to certain adherents of the Social Gospel, but Nick Comfort entered military service in November, 1917, requested a commission as a chaplain which was never granted, and completed his tour in the United States. His reaction to the military and to American participation in World War I rapidly developed into sharp disapproval. Comfort worked with the World Alliance For International Friendship Through the Churches in an effort to support the League of Nations and ratification of the Treaty of Versailles. Like many of his fellow countrymen, he soon felt betrayed by the inadequacy of "the war to end all wars," and by the failure of the treaty to resolve strife among the belligerents.⁶

Hoping to discover if he still desired to teach the young people of his native region, Comfort accepted an appointment in the spring of 1919 as an instructor of philosophy and religion at Trinity College in Tehuacan, Texas. He left the University of Chicago where he was

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studying philosophy under James Hayden Tufts, and had completed all residential work for a doctorate. The following year, Comfort asserted his intention to devote his life to building the church in the rural Southwest. Frequently in conflict with the views of fundamentalists throughout his career, the theologian at that time lambasted those who failed to support needed change while exhorting instead a return to "Holy Ghost revivals" or "Old Time Religion." He declared that the cry of "sad and crushed" tenant children should be heeded, or white slavery would certainly increase. Should a choice arise between church doctrine and the impoverished young, Comfort indicated that he would unequivocally side with the latter. Furthermore, like a true advocate of the Social Gospel, he charged that to redeem the world required making it a finer place to live in, that moral, social, political, and many other ideas condemned as "new fangled" must be employed.⁷

Believing further educational preparation was essential, Comfort enrolled at the famed Union Theological Seminary in New York City, and received his M.S.T. degree in 1923. He then attended the graduate school of Columbia University, working with John Dewey, but departed in 1924 to become pastor of the Presbyterian students at the University of Oklahoma.⁸

Shortly after arriving in Norman, Nick Comfort became involved with community and state social and political affairs. In July, 1925, he asked the president of the State Federation of Labor to speak at a Rotary Club meeting which he was chairing. The minister mentioned his desire to have the labor position presented to the club, whose members included professionals and businessmen. Comfort stated that most of these individuals were of rural stock, but had apparently "forgotten the block from which they were hewn." Nick's desire to challenge barriers involving class, race, religion, and nationality, and to promote the "brotherhood of man," was also displayed by his support for the religious activities of the Y.W.C.A. He deemed it essential to apply Christian principles to all existing problems, whether social or commercial, national or international.⁹

Because of a belief that public academic establishments offered inadequate religious instruction, Comfort joined with others to establish the Oklahoma School of Religion in 1927. Although not directly affiliated with the University of Oklahoma, college credit was granted for course work completed at the school. Prior to 1930, Comfort served on the faculty of the School of Religion as a representative of the Presbyterian Church, and as director of the institution. At that

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The Oklahoma School of Religion, established in Norman in 1927, was guided by Comfort until his retirement in 1947 (Courtesy Western History Collections).

date, Nick requested interdenominational support for the school, so that he could become Dean of the Oklahoma School of Religion, and not just act as the representative of a single church.¹⁰ His long tenure in that position proved to be a highly controversial one because of the unequivocal stands he took on charged issues of the period.

Among the most praised and the most condemned of Comfort's actions involved his participation with the inter-war peace movement. By the mid-1920s, the protest movement against war and militarism began to attract increasing attention from Nick Comfort. He communicated with the famed pacifist leaders and his fellow ministers, Kirby Page and John Nevin Sayre. A letter from Page congratulated Comfort for having organized at the University of Oklahoma a group affiliated with the pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation, a leading force in the anti-war ranks.¹¹

Comfort, in turn, declared his support for the activities of Sayre and indicated his wonderment at the latter's work. The Norman pastor

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wrote that militarism was potent, but that a determined group at the university always supported efforts for a "creative peace." Sayre responded by sending additional information from the Committee on Militarism in Education, along with a speech by Ross A. Collins, chairman of the House Subcommittee on Army Appropriations, which scorned material waste by the armed forces.¹²

Members of the era's peace movement attacked military training in public institutions, and Comfort berated the influence of the military at the University of Oklahoma. As a participant at the Oklahoma Synod of Presbyterian Churches held in Muskogee in November, 1930, he backed a resolution damning compulsory military training in the state's public schools; Comfort believed that the measure would indicate the importance of "the military situation" in Oklahoma. He later asserted that to terminate such training would require a strong stance by the public, and stated that "lovers of peace" should intensify their efforts to obtain "disarmament in education."¹³

Owing to his controversial stands on peace, economic woes, and race, the Presbyterian minister encountered both considerable praise and criticism during his first years in Norman. Some backed Comfort and the Oklahoma School of Religion. The Vice President and General Manager of the Oklahoma Gas and Electric Company, J. P. Owens, wrote to the chairman of the Phillips Petroleum Company, L. E. Phillips, in 1930, soliciting support for the School of Religion, which would supposedly serve as an antidote for the "various schools of materialistic thought . . . rampant in the United States." Owens indicated that religious bodies would provide "the foundation stone of our social order," and should thus be assisted by individuals with "large property interests."

Most defenders of the iconoclastic clergyman cheered Comfort's stand as a "liberal Christian" who challenged fundamentalist ideas. A colleague credited Comfort with having done more than any churchman or educator at the University of Oklahoma to oppose the fundamentalist tenets that were popular in the state. Others, however, belittled Comfort and asserted that he belonged "to the devil." In late 1931, fundamentalist pastor, C. F. Stealey, attacked Dean Comfort and the Oklahoma School of Religion for "modernistic teaching." The secretary of the school's board of trustees responded, stating that Comfort, "one of the most Christlike men in Oklahoma," required no defense. Nevertheless, Nick's invitation to Norman Thomas to speak at a Faculty Club luncheon, along with other activities, rapidly resulted in the Norman minister's condemnation as a "red."¹⁴

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Strife continued to afflict Comfort as his concern with social and political affairs intensified during the turbulent 1930s. With the American economy entrapped in the midst of the Great Depression, and with an international conflagration approaching, Comfort used three arenas to convey his ideas to the broad public. Beginning in September, 1935, he contributed a weekly column, "This Is Your Life," to the *Oklahoma Daily*, the campus newspaper. As he noted in his yearly report to the trustees of the Oklahoma School of Religion, Comfort believed that his editorials brought each week, "new friends, and new foes." He deemed it delightful to receive such high praise one week and such unrestrained invectives immediately thereafter. Significantly, this ambivalence emanated from the University of Oklahoma Board of Regents to school janitors, from nearly all Norman churches, and from many individuals throughout the state.¹⁵

In 1936 the Dean of the Oklahoma School of Religion helped establish the Norman Forum in an attempt to bring controversial speakers to the community. While plans evolved to create the forum, a Comfort-led group convened with President W. B. Bizzell of the University of Oklahoma to analyze the merits of the proposal. Comfort called public discussion essential while Bizzell worried about the reprobation that the university might receive. When the administrator suggested formation of a dinner club as an alternative, Comfort bristled that the university was "dying on the vine because it over-nurtured the innocuous." Comfort's argument prevailed.¹⁶

Pacifists and socialists were among the speakers who addressed the Norman Forum, thus again encircling a Comfort-associated organization with controversy. In response to a letter requesting more information about the forum, Nick exclaimed that it was designed to uphold "our fundamental American traditions." He felt that noted speakers and lively topics would help awaken the people to the benefits of their democratic institutions and to an awareness that these "must be cultivated if we are to endure."¹⁷

Comfort utilized his *Oklahoma Daily* column and his position as president of the Norman Forum to further the peace movement which flourished and then dissipated during the 1930s. By the middle of the decade, a student peace movement had emerged on the nation's college and university campuses. Although originating later in Norman than in many other areas, the anti-war movement appeared at the University of Oklahoma by the spring of 1936. The university administration allowed a thirty-minute "strike for peace" in April of that year, and another during the following spring. The 1937 gather-

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ing probably served as the highpoint of the anti-war effort at the University of Oklahoma as 2,000 students congregated at a peace rally, and 200 signed a petition requiring a vote by the American people to obtain a declaration of war. Encouraged by the Nye Committee report concerning American entrance into World War I, Comfort told the crowd that the proponents of war dared not to tell the American populace the true reasons for possible involvement in the worsening international crisis. He declared that the American public would refuse to fight if they were given proper information. Comfort decried munitions-makers as "dollar-chasers," and stated that to oppose them signified a challenge to militarism. He proposed that three of every ten dollars allocated for military expenditures be used to promote peace, and postulated that "then we won't need the other \$7 very long."¹⁸

Like many left-of-center during the height of the depression decade, Comfort believed that the drives for peace and social justice were inseparable. Thus, his *Oklahoma Daily* pieces not only riveted upon the issue of war and peace, but upon the economic holocaust caused by the worldwide depression. While the extensive dislocations engendered by the country's worst economic crisis abounded, Nick Comfort eloquently related the resulting deprivation. Because of this, he was often castigated as a proponent of class antagonism. Yet he repeatedly remarked that the very impoverishment of so many in a land of plenty, and the apparent selfishness of those at the top of the economic ladder, were the guiding forces in causing class consciousness and possible class warfare. Comfort recognized that "the downtrodden of the world" were becoming more perceptive and vocal than before. And unless conditions were ameliorated, he felt that the masses would confront "their oppressors" with force. He feared that such revolutionary action would produce wanton brutality and violence as had occurred during the Russian and Mexican revolutions, and as was brewing in the lands of China and India.¹⁹

Comfort warned that the recent calls for radical change in America were not the result of foreign agitation but were bred by real problems. He wrote: "The depression like a hypo put the causes of mass uprisings into the blood stream of our underprivileged classes." He believed that because of their continued destitution, the American poor were finally becoming cognizant of class realities, and he adjudged Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal attempts to alleviate the situation as only temporary palliatives which were doomed to failure. Unless something were done for the permanent relief of the suffering

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millions, they would be driven by sheer desperation toward "brute force and pillage." At such a time, in his opinion, every American would be forced to support or oppose them.²⁰

The dominance of business interests, Comfort argued, was the root of the grave economic and social ailments of the United States. He wrote that the nation had become "a businessman's civilization," and that giant corporations were spreading "their tentacles" into all aspects of the American state. He called the wealthy "the real masters of our country," and warned that a plutocracy could not be formed or maintained through democratic means, that an economic elite always employed force as protection against the downtrodden.²¹

Reverend Comfort charged that the wealthy were buttressed by repression and militarism. He stated that evidently the American "ruling class" no longer considered economic pressure sufficient protection for its riches, and was endeavoring to abrogate civil liberties "as never before." He believed that those who attempted to focus attention upon "economic evils" and who agitated for necessary reform were slandered. Teachers were required to take oaths of allegiance, and were scared to speak out on controversial issues. He also pointed out that public figures who favored municipal ownership of utilities were confronted by opposing forces which were backed by great monetary resources.²²

The wealthy and military leaders were linked, dependent upon one another, Comfort analyzed. This connection purportedly resulted in the profusion of the "tentacles" of the military, "octopus-like" over the entire country. Comfort condemned this development and the perceived glorification of military arms and "the military spirit." He denounced "the orgy of flag-waving and emotional superpatriotic prejudice" evidenced on armistice day. Viewing the international situation in the mid-1930s, he warned that the civilized world was preparing for an upcoming "holocaust of slaughter." He wondered how long the peaceful masses would continue to allow the "maniacal militarists" to lead them to destroy each other, in order that world markets and the control of raw materials might be retained. Comfort remarked that war had never resolved any problems, and he remembered "the last orgy of sacrifice" which had taken place during the first world war. The pastor exclaimed that the division of Christian peoples into "mere national cults, or insipid sects" lacking world vision, helped to feed the militaristic tide. He wrote that individuals should discard their hypocritical ways, and either disavow worship of "the Christ child" or work to create a social order where children would not be guided "to slaughter as He was by the militarists."²³

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To counteract what he considered militarism, Comfort called for a new mode of patriotism which would assist in the construction of an American nation that required no defense. Not an absolute pacifist, he declared that defense of one's homeland was not questioned. But the molding of a "fair and righteous" state that none would fear or want to destroy, was the vision Comfort held. To produce this ideal land, military funding should be used for peace propaganda, students should be required to take peace courses, peace advocates should be made heroes, peace societies should be formed. With these developments, "mankind's natural love of peace might blossom as a rose instead of being smothered as it now is."²⁴

To help instill the peace spirit, he believed that the public lauding of the military and militarism should end. Those who declared war would be required to man the war front and remain stationed there until the conflict terminated or until they perished. Conscription should begin with the elderly. No profit would be allowed from the war effort and all would be compelled to work for the nation's goals during the period of hostilities. Military pensions would be abolished and all the money previously so targeted would be used for the oldest and the neediest Americans. Finally, "all the tinsel" should be removed from the professional warriors; when not drilling or practicing, they would perform such essential tasks as street sanitation, garbage removal, and road construction. When soldiers died, they would be buried without "pomp or glory," just as other useful citizens were.²⁵

Viewing the growing attempts to increase military expenditures, Comfort feared that such legislative action would inevitably lead to American involvement in a world war. He argued that the only way for the United States to remain apart from the international battleground was to keep American possessions and citizens away from the arena of conflict.²⁶

The minister also opposed his nation's involvement in military action because of the loss of civil liberties and democratic freedoms which he believed inevitably ensued during wartime. He warned that democracy and militarism were diametrically opposed. Condemning those who declared that America required a first class dictatorship, he charged that "self-styled patriots" who urged suppression of dissenters were the real enemies, more so than the Japanese, Russians, or Germans. A greater danger resided in the fact that their means "destroyed the very things that have made our nation possible."²⁷

Attempts at the University of Oklahoma to prevent the establishment of a student chapter of the Veterans of Future Wars, an anti-

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war organization, and the presentation of two works by Clifford Odets, the left wing playwright, alarmed Nick Comfort. He asserted that fundamental rights, including those protected by the first ten amendments, were involved. Comfort chided the many who apparently were willing to abrogate certain freedoms from the university community. He stated that attempts to ban "outside influences" would require removal of the Reserve Officer Training Corps (R.O.T.C.) and its buildings, various university properties, and such groups as the Young Democrats, Young Republicans, Y.M.C.A., Y.W.C.A, and Phi Beta Kappa. The removal of so-called "outside influences" from the campus he adjudged impossible. Also, he believed that an academic institution depended upon discussion of pertinent issues to fulfill its role in society. For example, an analysis of whether the United States should enter a war was a vital question which he believed should be considered by all who were concerned with the national welfare. Political and economic considerations were the foundation of the state, and students needed to confront such queries. Furthermore, he stated that the right to hold any beliefs or to sponsor any political party or program, as long as no legislative enactment was ignored, involved fundamental American principles.²⁸

Comfort thus sharply attacked what he considered economic inequities and militarism, both of which he viewed as antithetical to democracy. The perils to democratic ideals and institutions deeply troubled Comfort as he, notwithstanding allegations to the contrary, believed strongly in the American democratic system. He declared that political democracy could not operate in isolation but required "intellectual, social, economic, and religious democracy" to prevent its dissipation. He wrote that democracy was not just a theory, but rather "a way of living" that demanded continual reaffirmation and the exercise of America's leading source of power—the ballot box. All institutions including the state and the church should be subordinated to "human welfare." As democracy and the concept of class were directly contradictory, the people needed to demand economic democracy, needed to engage in a protracted struggle or face loss of political freedom. Comfort concluded that "economic autocracy and political democracy" were engaged in "a struggle to the death." He roared that economic slavery must be ended, that employers and workers together must establish labor conditions, and that the aged, the infirm, the unemployed must be cared for.²⁹

Religion and the various churches should perform progressive

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roles, Comfort indicated, to support the American democratic ethos, social betterment, and peace. He remarked that the New Testament was "the magna charta of democracy." Religionists should see Christianity "as it really is, a brotherly way of living." Comfort warned that the religious must relinquish the sword, for weapons only brought "spiritual death to the wielder as truly as physical death to the victim." Violence only bred "political and economic suicide." Once people recognized this, a great stride would be made toward the elimination of "modern mass murder."³⁰

Additionally, Comfort exhorted the church to disavow its claim to omnipotence. "Religious imperialism" must not be preached anymore. This was essential because of what he considered the longstanding church support for the American military presence in foreign lands which helped to remind "the natives" that they "would do well to respect the missionaries."³¹

Comfort encountered a trying period from 1938–1941 due in part to his continued advocacy of the Social Gospel and noninterventionism in spite of the heightened fascist push and the demise of the Popular Front alliance of liberals and leftists following the Nazi-Soviet Pact. His outspoken and controversial stands upon leading issues of the times produced bitter opposition and the sharpest attacks yet directed against him and the Oklahoma School of Religion.

While many left-of-center activists began to concentrate their attention upon the worsening international situation, Comfort retained his focus upon social and economic concerns in Oklahoma and the Southwest. He discussed the deplorable conditions in the black district of Shawnee, stating that more than 1,000 people lived in huts and shacks, some comprised of boxes. The average weekly income of the black families was less than two dollars. He charged that unconstitutional but "inhuman segregation laws" kept the people entrapped in dilapidated living conditions.³²

Declaring that if Jesus were present he would be aiding his "suffering and dying" children, Comfort termed interracial committees essential, and he participated in the initial Southern Conference on Human Welfare held in Birmingham, Alabama, in the fall of 1938. There, the Norman minister guided an unsuccessful battle against racial segregation in the organization. Members of the gathering discussed the deep-rooted economic ailments of the South, and Comfort encouraged cooperation between various groups which desired change. "Labor, farm, civil liberties and government, housing, race relations and suffrage," he stated were related concerns.³³

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In late January, 1939, State Representative Tom Kight of Claremore criticized Nicholas Comfort and the Oklahoma School of Religion because of the dean's participation at the Birmingham convention. During a public hearing at the state capitol concerning a criminal syndicalism measure which he had proposed, the state legislator claimed that the school was "communistic" and he alleged that radicals were attempting to augment their influence by infiltrating churches. Challenging the Kight charges, Comfort demanded an open meeting to attempt to publicly vindicate the Oklahoma School of Religion from the red smear. Kight refused to convene such a hearing, and the newly elected governor, Leon Phillips, quickly berated the teaching of Communism or nazism in the state's public schools and called for a university investigation.³⁴

In his correspondence with Kight, Comfort accused the Claremore representative of either ignorantly or maliciously trying to destroy the Oklahoma School of Religion with slanderous remarks. Comfort asserted that Kight could not cloud the issue by discussing something "as tame" as the involvement with the Southern Conference for Human Welfare.³⁵

Friends, former students, and allies lent moral support to Nick and his institution. An editorial in the *Oklahoma Daily* stated that many in Norman were "laughing out loud" at Kight's charges. The editorial writer declared that the university and Norman communities recognized that Nick Comfort had probably done more than any other Oklahoman "to encourage liberal thought." Furthermore, in the eyes of his supporters, the educator was one of the few individuals who supported freedom of speech even for his opponents. The success of the Norman Forum was largely attributed to Comfort, and he was praised for his courageous proposal for teacher's pensions and for his aid in protecting oppressed minorities. The editorial indicated that the University of Oklahoma faculty included several liberals, but that unlike Comfort, few "would risk their necks." The essay concluded with the observations that the churchman quickly spoke out when he saw injustice develop, that he was a preserver of democracy, and an instructor of Christian ethics in the classroom.³⁶

A letter addressed to Comfort blasted the "Ism-Witch Hunt" of Governor Phillips and the "inquisition" of State Representative Kight. The writer believed that the two public officials apparently supported the activities of the House Un-American Activities Committee, as did those who desired to besmirch "all progressives and forward movements." Elizabeth Irwin, fired from her Oklahoma City

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While often embroiled in controversy, Comfort continued to teach classes at the School of Religion (Courtesy Western History Collections).

teaching post because of her political views, wrote to encourage Comfort.³⁷

Perhaps influenced by the condemnation of him on the right, Comfort sharply castigated an American Nazi Party conclave in New York City. In his weekly article, he declared that while he had always defended civil liberties, the open avowal of armed insurrection against the American government by the Nazis betrayed all democratic principles. He believed that they were active rebels and should be treated as such. To counteract them necessitated a large educational campaign, and a recognition of the deficiencies in the American economic, political, and social order.³⁸

Following a speech which he delivered before the Oklahoma Youth Legislature in the State Capitol on January 9, 1940, Comfort again encountered strident criticism. In his talk, he warned that the greatest danger to democratic processes emanated from those who repeatedly employed "constitutional shiboleths [sic] but by their actions trample the constitution into the dust." Comfort denounced the attempt to exclude blacks and Communists from the Youth Legisla-

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ture, a development which had resulted in division of the organization. He stated that despite his disagreement with the political desires of the Communists, he felt obligated to defend their constitutional right to express their ideas and program. He also asserted that blacks resided in this nation "through no fault of their own," and that racial discrimination contradicted American ideals and the concept of the brotherhood of man. Comfort wrote that a condemnation of Hitler's anti-Semitic persecution was insincere if "such flagrant racial discrimination" was allowed within Oklahoma.³⁹

Because of this address and previous actions, Comfort was roundly censured by American Legion members who demanded his dismissal as chaplain of the Oklahoma Central State Hospital, a post he had held for more than fourteen years. The commander of the state chapter of the Legion, Dr. A. B. Rivers of Okmulgee, avowed that national unity was essential and that "no good American citizen" could "bosom a Communist in one hand and uphold the constitution of America in the other." He proceeded to assail Comfort as a Communist. After the minister once again demanded proof of the charge or a public apology, Rivers retorted that he had never accused Comfort of being a Communist but refused the request for either a debate or a retraction. Despite the disavowal of the Communist allegation, a letter from the deputy adjutant of the Legion to a high school principal reflected the thinking of certain members of the organization. The writer indicated that it was "disgusting" to realize that a supposed pedagogue "places his racial desires above his desires to train young people and then it is more disgusting to see them hide behind 'Democracy' to do this. Typically Communist." He suggested that more instruction be directed toward young "colored children" concerning "citizenship, rather than try to put them under Communist and other such influences by prating about racial equality."⁴⁰

In his own defense, Comfort stated that his political, social, and religious tenets were "an open book" for all Oklahomans. Comfort proudly declared that he had always fought, "without fear or favor to anyone" for what he deemed proper, and would continue to do so. Such a stance, he recognized, had produced powerful antagonists, including certain Legion members.⁴¹

The *Oklahoma Daily* continued to support Comfort, but on February 28, the State Board removed him from his hospital position. The board cleared Comfort of the Communist charges, but reasoned that as the hospital cared for veterans and was aided by the Legion, the wishes of the organization had to be heeded. The following day,

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Comfort thanked the board for acknowledging that he was not a Communist and disclosed that he would no longer contest the ouster, refusing "to fight force with force." But he warned that the Legion was crippling democratic freedoms in the state.⁴²

In a final salvo Comfort wrote to Rivers, bemoaning what he considered undemocratic and anti-American activities of the Legion concerning the dismissal. Comfort asked whether the inability to confront one's accusers and the lack of substantive evidence for the accusation did not violate democratic ideals. He called for the Legion to admit its bigotry and "wilful denial of brotherhood, justice, and constitutional rights to man." He castigated the organization's incitement of students to employ a "Red hunt" at Oklahoma A & M College. Comfort queried why the Legionnaires considered themselves privileged to dictate material to be discussed in public schools and on public platforms, and he wondered how their "desired dictatorship differed from those of Stalin and Hitler."⁴³

As had occurred the previous year, sustenance for the pastor came from across the state. One writer claimed that the American Legion had become as closed-minded and bigoted as the Klan. Another letter compared Comfort's troubles with the crucifixion of Jesus and the poisoning of Socrates, and deplored the "witch-hunts" that made it more dangerous for citizens to think, and even more perilous to express their thoughts. Students at the University of Oklahoma circulated a petition to demonstrate their indignation at the treatment of Comfort.⁴⁴

His adherence to the evaporating peace movement and his bitter denunciation of the American mobilization effort for possible entrance into the world war produced still more difficulties for the minister. Unlike many American liberals and leftists, Comfort remained a non-interventionist, despite augmented fascist aggression and success. Believing that the governments of England and France were little more democratic than the regime in Germany, he retained his conviction that the United States should remain aloof from the fighting. He considered these European states to be imperialistic, oppressive, and brutal, and he wrote that "they fattened on the blood of crushed people." Consequently, he stated that no aid should be granted to any European power. Rather, the United States should strive to aid the masses in all lands by engaging in direct contact with the people themselves. Responding to such analyses, a "foreign born patriot" termed Comfort's failure to extol the preparedness program an insult to all "red blooded" Americans. This writer asked: "If you

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don't like the country why don't you leave or are you one of the fifth columnists running at large." He also charged that Comfort had disgraced education.⁴⁵

On May 19, 1940, as the Roosevelt military defense program continued to face heavy criticism, Comfort published a column in the *Oklahoma Daily* which condemned what he termed "a fit of hysteria" concerning an imminent threat to the nation. The minister declared that Germany would never attack the United States, and that his country was well armed for defensive purposes. He considered the air force to be the best element for protection, and indicated that moneys spent on the other branches of the armed forces were funds "poured into a rathole." Comfort argued that in spite of opposition, the United States would furnish the Allied powers with matériel, and should work to support "the democratic ideal" in the Western Hemisphere.⁴⁶

The reaction to this editorial, which was penned at a time when the Nazi blitzkrieg was sweeping across Europe, was rapid and hostile. Governor Phillips angrily stated that the school paper should drop the Comfort column. Comfort answered that if the governor favored such tactics, "then he should go over and join Hitler." Nancy Royal, editor-elect of the *Oklahoma Daily*, revealed that she would confer with Dean Comfort concerning whether the column would be continued. President Bizzell suggested that Comfort limit the column to religious matters, but the latter refused to submit to censorship. While the 1937 *Sooner Yearbook* had been dedicated to Nick Comfort, the changed mood on the University of Oklahoma campus was demonstrated by the decision to drop the "This Is Your Life" column.⁴⁷

Over the next few months, Comfort intensified his support for the faltering anti-war movement and for civil liberties. He served as a sponsor for the Committee to Keep America Out of the War and the Declaration Against Conscription, which warned that a peacetime draft "smacks of totalitarianism." Because he had been incorrectly listed on the national brochures as Dean of the University of Oklahoma, Comfort wrote to the organizations requesting that the mistake be rectified. He asserted that the university administration was "highly militaristic" and was sharply opposed to his position, and that a pervasive statewide resentment against his stand existed; therefore, it was highly unfair that he be associated with the academic institution. Comfort was also affiliated with the Committee on Militarism in Education and supported the Emergency Peace Mobilization which declared that strict neutrality provided the best defense, and urged members to guard the rights of labor, religious

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groups, and racial minorities, and civil liberties in general, and to support social reform.⁴⁸

In early October of 1940 Comfort manifested his interest in the formation of an Oklahoma Committee on Civil Liberties to record abuses of political rights. Several recent developments in the state had demonstrated to him the need for such an organization. After writing a letter to his congressman urging opposition to a conscription bill, Professor Streeter Stuart had been dismissed from Southeastern State College. Through employment of a seldom used criminal syndicalism measure, eighteen persons had been convicted because of affiliation with the Communist Party. Their anti-military positions had caused over 200 members of the Jehovah's Witnesses to be arrested, and the American Legion had petitioned the courts to take three children from their parents after the youngsters had been expelled from school for failing to salute the American flag.⁴⁹

On October 19, 1940, investigators of the Dies' House Un-American Activities Committee congregated in Oklahoma City and questioned Nicholas Comfort and two other ministers concerning their political views. When an interrogator attempted to moralize about the impropriety of a liberal "sticking his neck" out at the present time, Comfort exclaimed: "Young man, it's a shame to see a nice fellow as you working for such a rotten boss like Martin Dies." The three churchmen issued a paper claiming that the Dies' committee call was "trumped up" and was designed to intimidate or stigmatize those individuals who attempted to uphold constitutional freedoms and democratic processes during a time of great international and national crises.⁵⁰

Shortly thereafter, six faculty members, directly or indirectly affiliated with the University of Oklahoma, including Comfort, called for the creation of a state civil rights' committee at an upcoming conference on constitutional liberties. The pastor's old antagonist, Governor Phillips, asserted that the professors had no business dealing with such an organization, that they were employed to teach and should not become involved with issues that did not concern them. He remarked that the six individuals were "apparently sadly misinformed," and that perhaps there was insufficient work "to do down there in Norman." Despite the protestations of the governor, the six participated in the conference, which resulted in the establishment of the Oklahoma Federation For Constitutional Rights. Dr. A. B. Adams, Dean of the College of Business Administration, quickly acclaimed that such a move against the American government should not be tolerated.⁵¹

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Undoubtedly at least in partial response to the actions of the new organization, the state legislature in early 1941 initiated an investigation into "all subversive activities at the University of Oklahoma." Among those called before the "Little Dies' Committee" was a now familiar figure at legislative investigations, Nicholas Comfort. Friends who remembered that trying period avowed that the Norman pastor "was completely unawed" by the proceedings. While waiting to testify at this inquiry, Nick Comfort "lay upon a table and slept the sleep of the just." In fact, he had to be awakened to undergo the interrogation. One individual reminisced that when Nick actually appeared before the investigators, "he was so plain-spoken that the hearing became a comedy." Comfort declared that he was a prime instigator in the creation of the Oklahoma Federation, and condemned what he considered the unjust arrests of Communists and the dismissal of Professor Stuart. The Oklahoma chapter of the Ku Klux Klan proceeded to attack the civil liberties' organization and cited Comfort as among the Federation's supporters.⁵²

In May, 1941, the Oklahoma Senate's "Little Dies' Committee" report recommended the dismissal of Maurice Halperin of the Department of Modern Languages, and proclaimed that the Oklahoma Federation For Constitutional Rights had been devised by outside, subversive elements. The Oklahoma Federation responded by accusing the committee of anti-Semitic behavior in its questioning of Halperin. The Federation claimed that the attempt to dismiss the professor was without evidence, a demonstration of "dictatorial procedure" and an indication of "religious and racial intolerance." The organization questioned why the state legislators considered themselves too royal for criticism levied by the public which had elected them. When the committee proposed the disassociation of the Oklahoma School of Religion from the University of Oklahoma, President Bizzell defended the institution as "one of the most satisfactory in the country."⁵³

Having overcome repeated public investigations, Comfort soon was jolted by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December, 1941, which was followed by an American declaration of war. For some time, Nick generally refrained from commenting on the international arena, thus paralleling the course followed by many of the remaining segments of the peace movement. Perhaps significantly, his daughter Elizabeth was photographed with a group of university students who were listening intently to an organizer calling for the defense of the rights of conscientious objectors.⁵⁴

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Despite the general disintegration of the prewar peace movement, a pacifist element remained opposed to their nation's participation in the conflict, and American churchmen were among the antiwar leaders who urged protection of civil liberties. Many conscientious objectors were placed in Civilian Public Service camps during the war, where they gradually developed the concept of Gandhi-like resistance, or satyagraha, to effect social change, a practice that would be extensively employed by radical and reform groups through the postwar era.⁵⁵

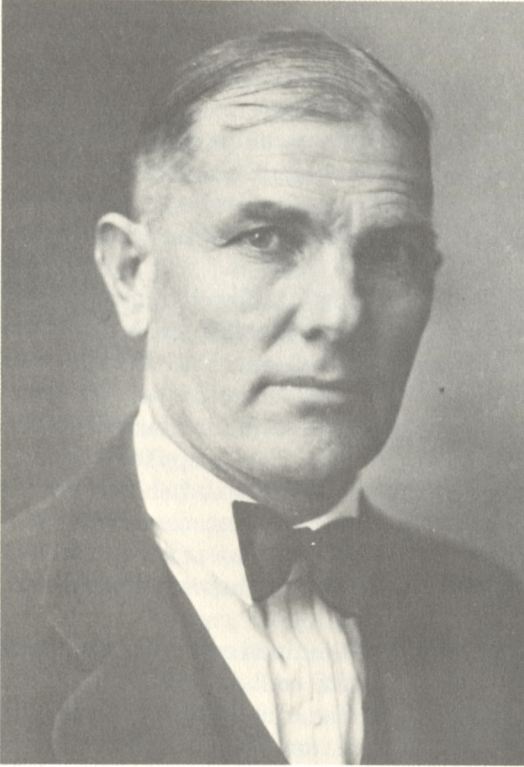
Even prior to December 7, 1941, Nick Comfort had praised the Gandhian movement. Lauding the Indian pacifist as "one of the half-dozen supermen of all time," he declared that Gandhi was employing the finest principles which religion could offer. The practice of satyagraha reportedly gave the world its finest example "of the practicability of the Sermon on the Mount," as it supposedly eradicated violence and thus abolished war. Comfort stated that such a movement would one day be adapted to American democratic procedures, and that then democracy would move toward "the development of the fullest life for the greatest number that any government has yet afforded."⁵⁶

As the world war exploded, Comfort remained committed to social improvement, visiting Japanese relocation centers and fighting for a program of teacher retirement in Oklahoma. Ineligible for such benefits, as he was an instructor at a private institution, Comfort nevertheless believed deeply in the worth of a free public school system, and he served as president of the Oklahoma Association for Teachers Retirement, traveling around the state to organize groups which would promote necessary legislation. In 1942 voters supported creation of a teacher retirement system in Oklahoma.⁵⁷

Still desirous of a forum through which he could express his ideas throughout the state, Nick Comfort helped establish the *Oklahoma Journal of Religion* in January, 1944. In its pages, editor Comfort again affirmed that a brotherhood of man existed beyond the false barriers of class, wealth, learning, and nationality. He editorialized that cooperation was essential for progress. He wrote that those who challenged the status quo were denounced, murdered, imprisoned, or crucified. Along with the quiet ones who determinedly fought for good causes, however, they had guided the path "from darkness to light."⁵⁸

Looking ahead to the postwar world, Comfort proclaimed that major domestic and international dilemmas would have to be confronted. Condemning segregation and anti-Semitism, the minister

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Nick Comfort remained active until the post-World War II era, always supporting his belief in the Social Gospel (Courtesy Western History Collections).

exhorted that these ills, along with “German Jew-baiting” and “Jap jingoism,” must be contested. On the world front, Comfort predicted that the United States, Soviet Russia, and England would determine the course of the postwar period. He believed that the Russians were not “land hungry,” and that the Soviet Union had been the nation most committed to creating world peace. He felt that the Communist state was engaged in a concerted effort to improve the condition of its masses, and that while Americans might not approve of certain aspects of the Soviet program, a peaceful world order would best allow for positive transformations. Comfort feared that Britain would attempt to resubjugate its old colonial empire, a development which he felt should be prevented by the Soviet Union and the United States. He believed that the principles of freedom and democracy were best represented in his own land, and that America would possess its greatest opportunity as a leader during the upcoming peacetime. He

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argued that the United States should work for progress and reform and not repeat the isolationist stance of the post-World War I years.⁵⁹

As the war neared a close, Comfort received a blistering letter which reproved him for his sympathetic attitude toward "RED MARXIST RUSSIA," the "hellish land of rape, murder, pestilence, and the vicious creed of KARL MARX—RELIGION IS THE OPIUM OF THE PEOPLE." Comfort's foe told him to go live in the Soviet Union, and declared that "the Reds" were busy achieving control in America while men were "being slaughtered by the millions for LIBERTY and CHRIST." The agitated letter writer warned that some "twenty million Republicans" felt as he did about "this Red Russian menace" to the nation, and were determined to check university instruction. The message was signed "An irate listener, and an AMERICAN who believes in the DEMOCRACY OF GEORGE WASHINGTON AND THOMAS JEFFERSON and not in the hellish Economic tribulation and philosophy of Karl Marx!"⁶⁰

Postwar America failed to usher in the harmony and social progress which Comfort desired as the seeds of a red scare quickly appeared. Because of inadequate funding, which was undoubtedly attributable to the prevailing political atmosphere, Comfort's controversial Oklahoma School of Religion shut down in 1947. The fundamentalist element in Oklahoma's Protestant churches also contributed to the demise of the School of Religion. Yet friends acknowledged that had the dean weakened his highly principled stands, money for his institution would have been available. Comfort however, "was never willing to compromise or to do or say things he did not believe in," and he refused to avoid contentious issues.⁶¹

The political concerns of Nick Comfort continued unabated, and in early 1948, he helped write the state constitution for the Progressive Party. Revolving around the candidacy of Roosevelt's former vice-president, Henry Wallace, the Progressive Party attacked the cold warrior policies of Harry Truman, condemned the mounting infringement of political liberties, and urged expansion of social reform measures. In the summer of 1948, Nick served as a delegate at the party's founding convention in Philadelphia. Decimated by malicious claims of being a Communist, Wallace's own fumbblings, and the leftward tilt of Truman prior to election day, the party vote proved highly disappointing. The charge of Communist domination of the party proved disastrous, and by September of the following year, Comfort seemed to feel the accusation was justified. Renouncing his membership in a public letter, Comfort declared that both Communists and Roman

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Catholics possessed "a loyalty center outside the United States" that frequently overrode their allegiance to this nation, and that they often advocated any means to achieve their goals. Comfort stated that he was "unalterably opposed to totalitarianism in all its forms," and affirmed that he possessed "no sympathy with Communist tactics," which he called "so stupid" as to hold little attraction for thoughtful individuals. Additionally, he exclaimed: "The Communists' appeal to force is contrary to all that I hold dear. Their appeal to class struggle is a denial of my concept of the brotherhood of man." Comfort affirmed that nevertheless, he would continue to defend the liberties of all groups.⁶²

The Red Scare tactics of Senator Joseph McCarthy, which gathered full force during the 1950s, appeared to only indirectly bother the semi-retired Comfort. As McCarthy whipped up his anti-Communist campaign, Nick received a letter from a friend who warned that America would likely suffer setbacks in Germany and China because Americans did not believe strongly enough in democracy. The correspondence charged that the American people had become "intellectual witch hunters trying to determine what people think," and that if Jesus ventured to the United States, McCarthy would proclaim him a Communist. The writer continued: "Guilt by association, without trial and without a chance to know who is your accuser seems to be the fashion nowadays." As the conflicts of the era worsened, several Oklahoma scientists were compelled to discuss their dealings with Nick Comfort.⁶³

Comfort now spent the bulk of his time on a farm located fifteen miles from Norman. The Comforts had sold their city residence, and had purchased the farm in May, 1948. In September, 1955, Nick Comfort suffered a stroke which left him paralyzed on the right side. One close compatriot remembered that Comfort loved physical activity, and that illness "broke his spirit." The Comforts soon moved to Rochester, Minnesota to be near their daughter, who was a physician, and the Mayo Clinic. On March 27, 1956, Nicholas Comfort died of a stroke.⁶⁴

At a memorial service in Norman on April 29, allies and colleagues remembered Nick. They praised his convictions and ideals, proclaimed him "an uncommon man" and a true democrat, termed him fearless and "a devoted patriot" who truly loved the indigenous radical spirit of Oklahoma. The eulogists lauded his real friendship, great energy and "magnificent freedom of mind," and described him as "untamed," a prophet, a giant, an individual. Many expressed their

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admiration for his belief in the Christian brotherhood, and one long-time friend declared that "Nick was a devoted churchman who came remarkably near to practicing what he preached." Nearly a quarter of a century after his death, another friend fondly remembered that Comfort "loved his fellow man," and "wanted to fight for all his principles. That was his whole life."⁶⁵

The concept of the Social Gospel, where men of the church utilized their pulpits to aid social reform, best encapsulates the philosophy of this Presbyterian pastor and educator, Nicholas Comfort. Comfort strove to further civil liberties, civil rights, economic betterment, and peace. He considered civil liberties as the cornerstone of the American democratic system, and continually defended the rights of castigated political and religious dissidents. Protection of the civil rights of racial minorities he deemed an essential part of the quest to create the brotherhood of man. Yet political freedoms alone were incomplete, Comfort argued, without corresponding economic rights, and thus he called for a certain degree of redistribution of wealth to aid the most impoverished. Consistently, he warned that American democracy and his envisioned brotherhood of man could never exist in a militaristic state; consequently, he dedicated long hours for the peace movement.

Because of his ideas and actions, this proponent of the Social Gospel, like so many other American reformers and radicals of his era, confronted considerable opposition and criticism. Working in a state with an increasingly conservative political environment and a continuing fundamentalist religious orientation, Nick Comfort challenged reactionary political and church doctrine. While he repeatedly endeavored to help effect the Christian brotherhood of man, Comfort was absurdly termed an instigator of class warfare, a subversive, and a "red."

Buttressed by his strongly held beliefs, Nick Comfort steadfastly held to his democratic and libertarian ideals. Thus, he unerringly followed the tradition of the homegrown radicalism of the Southwest.

ENDNOTES

* Bob Cottrell recently received his Ph.D. in History and is now an instructor at the University of Oklahoma.

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⁷ Biographical sketch, p. 2 (OSORC) (index); Comfort to A. J. Green, September 28, 1920 (OSORC) (III, Misc. & Pers. Corr. of E. N. Comfort).

⁸ Biographical sketch, p. 2 (OSORC) (index).

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¹⁰ Ray Gittinger, *The University of Oklahoma, 1892–1942* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1942), pp. 228–230.

¹¹ Chatfield, *For Peace*; DeBenedetti, *The Peace Reform*, pp. 108–137; Kirby Page to Comfort, February 9, 1925 (OSORC), (XXV, Personal Correspondence; P).

¹² Comfort to John Nevin Sayre, May 23, 1929 (OSORC) (XXVI, Personal Correspondence; S-second); Sayre to Comfort, May 27, 1929 (OSORC) (XXVI, Personal Correspondence; S-second).

¹³ Chatfield, *For Peace*, pp. 152–156; DeBenedetti, *The Peace Reform*, p. 119; Comfort to Tucker P. Smith, November 17, 1930 (OSORC) (XXVI, Personal Correspondence; S-second); Comfort to Rev. F. M. Sheldon, March 2, 1931 (OSORC) (XXVI, Personal Correspondence; S-second); Comfort to Smith, March 2, 1931 (OSORC) (XXVI, Personal Correspondence; S-second); Comfort to Smith, November 17, 1930 (OSORC) (XXVI, Personal Correspondence; S-second).

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¹⁷ Comfort to Mr. Lay, December 28, 1936 (OSORC) (III, Personal Correspondence & Misc.).

¹⁸ Patti McGill Peterson, "Student Organizations and the Antiwar Movement in America, 1900-1960," in *Peace Movements in America*, ed. Chatfield (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), pp. 122-126; Chatfield, *For Peace*, pp. 259-261, 271-273, 295-296; DeBenedetti, *The Peace Reform*, pp. 126-127, 131; "Peace Meeting Will Be Held This Morning," *The Oklahoma Daily* (hereinafter referred to as *Daily*), April 22, 1939, p. 1; "Peace Group to Petition For Vote on Declarations of War," *Daily*, April 23, 1937, p. 1; "Peace Day Is Peaceful On Campus," *Daily*, April 28, 1938, p. 1.

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²³ *Ibid.*; Comfort, "This Is," *Daily*, November 8, 1936, p. 1; Comfort, "This Is," *Daily*, December 19, 1937, pp. 1-2.

²⁴ Comfort, "This Is," *Daily*, November 8, 1936, p. 1.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Comfort, "This Is," *Daily*, September 19, 1937, p. 1.

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²⁸ Comfort, "This Is," *Daily*, March 22, 1936, p. 1.

²⁹ Comfort, "This Is," *Daily*, February 16, 1936, p. 1; Comfort, "This Is," *Daily*, September 18, 1938, p. 1; Comfort, "This Is," *Daily*, July 9, 1938, p. 1; Comfort, "This Is," *Daily*, May 24, 1936, p. 1.

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⁶³ Caute, *The Great Fear*; Fred J. Cook, *The Nightmare Decade: The Life and Times of Joe McCarthy* (New York: Random House, 1971); Robert Griffith, *The Politics of Fear: Joseph R. McCarthy and the Senate* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1970); Frank Milton Sheldon to Comfort, April 3, 1950 (OSORC) (III, Personal Correspondence & Misc.); Dr. J. Rud Nielsen, untitled eulogy, p. 8, April 29, 1956 (OSORC) (index).

⁶⁴ Biographical sketch, p. 4 (OSORC) (index); Interview with Delatore; "Rev. E. N. Comfort Dies of Stroke in Minnesota," *Transcript*, March 28, 1956, p. 1.

⁶⁵ John F. Bender, "Tribute to Dean E. N. Comfort," p. 5, April 29, 1956 (OSORC) (index); Ewing, "Nick Comfort's Attitude," pp. 4–5; Thompson, "Personal," pp. 10–12; Nielsen, untitled eulogy, p. 7; Mitchell S. Epperson, "A Tribute to Nick Comfort," p. 9, April 29, 1956 (OSORC) (index); Lowe, "Broken Images," p. 2; interview with Dora McFarland, November 15, 1979.