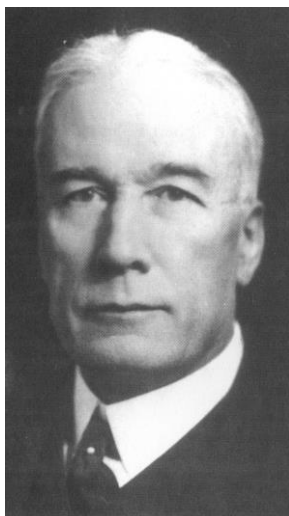


**The Burke Library Archives, Columbia University Libraries,  
Union Theological Seminary, New York**

Missionary Research Library Archives: Section 12

Finding Aid for

**Robert E. Speer Papers, 1795 – 1947**



John Piper, *Robert E. Speer: Prophet of the American Church*, Louisville: Geneva Press, 2000.

Finding Aid prepared by: Brigette C. Kamsler, Kristen Leigh Southworth, Jessica Patterson,  
Virginia Pastor, Elizabeth Beller, Jazmin Mooney, October 2013  
With financial support from the Henry Luce Foundation

**Summary Information**

Creator: Robert E. Speer, 1867 – 1947  
Title: Robert E. Speer Papers  
Inclusive dates: 1795 – 1947  
Bulk dates: 1890 – 1945  
Abstract: Pamphlets, reports, correspondence, and minutes collected by prominent American church leader, author, and missionary statesman who served on the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States for 46 years and was a founding member of the Foreign Missions Conference of North America.  
Size: 38 records cartons, 38 linear feet  
Storage: Onsite storage  
Repository: The Burke Library  
Union Theological Seminary  
3041 Broadway  
New York, NY 10027  
Email: [burkearchives@libraries.cul.columbia.edu](mailto:burkearchives@libraries.cul.columbia.edu)

### Administrative Information

- Provenance:** Originally part of the independent Missionary Research Library, these records were donated by Speer's widow, Emma Baily Speer, in 1949. In 1976 the records were accessioned to the Burke Library archives with the closure of the MRL.
- Access:** Archival papers are available to registered readers for consultation by appointment only. Please contact archives staff by email to [burkearchives@libraries.cul.columbia.edu](mailto:burkearchives@libraries.cul.columbia.edu), or by postal mail to The Burke Library address on page 1, as far in advance as possible. Burke Library staff is available for inquiries or to request a consultation on archival or special collections research.
- Access Restrictions:** The collection is unrestricted to readers. Certain materials, however, are in a fragile condition, and this may necessitate restriction in handling and copying.
- Preferred Citation:** Item description, MRL 12: Robert E. Speer Papers, series #, box #, and folder #, book #, The Burke Library Archives, Columbia University Libraries, at Union Theological Seminary, New York.

### Biography

Robert Elliot Speer was born on September 10, 1867 in Huntingdon, Pennsylvania. He graduated from Philips Academy in 1886 and went on to Princeton University, where he intended to study law. There, he was greatly influenced by the preaching of missionary pioneer Arthur Tappan Pierson, and later during a prayer meeting with two missionaries from India, Robert Wilder and John Forman, Speer decided to dedicate his life and career to foreign missionary work.

During the remainder of his studies at Princeton University, Speer became a leader in the Student Volunteer Movement. He graduated valedictorian from Princeton in 1889, and a year later began his studies at Princeton Theological Seminary. In 1891, after only a year of study, he left his theological training mid-semester to accept an invitation to be an assistant secretary of the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions. He became the youngest man ever appointed to such a position, and was the only layperson on the secretarial staff. Nevertheless, he soon became senior secretary, and would remain with the board for the next forty-six years.

In 1891, Speer met Emma Doll Bailey, and in 1893 they were married in Elizabeth, New Jersey. Emma Bailey Speer later became President of the National Board of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). Together they had five children, two of whom died prior to Robert's death in 1947. In 1906, their second daughter, Eleanor McMurtrie, died at the age of 3 from an unknown illness. In 1934, their eldest son, Elliott, was shot and murdered in his own home. The assailant was never identified and the crime remains unsolved to this day. Speer was survived by his two daughters Margaret Bailey and Constance Sophia, and his youngest son William.

Speer's first missionary trip was to Mexico in 1894. Over the course of his career, he would visit missions in Persia, India, China, Korea, and Japan. After touring through South America in

1909, he became a central figure in the effort to extend evangelical Protestant missions in Latin America. In 1913 he helped found the Foreign Missions Conference of North America (FMCNA) Committee on Cooperation in Latin America, which he then led for twenty years.

Throughout his career, Speer had great interest in ecumenism. He was a founding member and leader of the Interdenominational Conference of Foreign Missionary Boards and Societies, and its successor, the FMCNA. He played prominent roles at three major missionary conferences: the Ecumenical Missionary Conference in New York in 1900, the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910, and the International Missionary Council in Jerusalem in 1928. In 1905, he spoke at the Inter-Church Conference on Federation, the meeting which led to the organization of the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America (FCC).

In 1917, Speer became chairman of the FCC General War-Time Commission of the Churches, which united the ministries of various churches to soldiers and their families during World War I. It became the most extensive cooperative work ever achieved by the Protestant churches in the United States, and in 1920 Speer was elected President of the FCC. He was the first layperson to hold this position. During his time as president, he formed a new Commission on the Church and Race Relations. In 1928 he served on a committee of the General Assembly to consider the role of women in the Presbyterian church, and was an important advocate of the proposal that women be admitted to the full ministry of the church.

Although Speer was never ordained, he was often treated as a member of the clergy, and the church leaders of his day recognized him as one of the top preachers of their time. Speer was also influential in his writing, producing sixty-six books in his lifetime, including a number of biographies of missionaries and several important volumes on missionary theory. He also published many articles, including two essays for *The Fundamentals*.

Theologically, Speer was difficult to place. He refused to join or be counted in any particular theological camp, and he openly deplored the factionalism of “rationalists, reactionaries, radicals, liberals, conservatives, fundamentalists, and modernists” alike. In 1933, he led the struggle against fundamentalist J. Gresham Machen’s attacks on the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions, while in the same year, he led the opposition against the report published by the Laymen’s Inquiry on Foreign Missions, which he regarded as harmful to the Christ-centered view of missions. He has typically been regarded as a theological conservative, but was accused by many in his day of modernism, and took positions that many would regard as liberal.

Speer served as president of the board of directors of Princeton Theological Seminary from 1937 until his death. He died on November 23, 1947 in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania.

#### Sources:

Piper, John F., *Robert E. Speer: Prophet of the American Church*, Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2000.

Patterson, James Alan, “Robert E. Speer and the Development of North American Mission Theology and Theory, 1891-1914,” North Atlantic Missiology Research Forum, 1998.

**Collection Scope and Content Note**

The collection consists of over 400 hand-bound books containing primarily pamphlets on a number of topics related to world missions, missionary theology, and international politics from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. These pamphlets were part of Speers' personal library and correspond with issues, committees, conferences, and missionary efforts in which he was directly involved. Some books in the collection also contain handwritten or typed correspondence, notes, drafts, manuscripts, speeches, and reports. These have been marked with an asterisk (\*) in the contents list.

A wide range of topics are covered by the pamphlets, including foreign missions in China, Japan, Korea, India, Persia, the Middle East, and Latin America; the Student Volunteer Movement; the Jerusalem Conference, World War II; the Sino-Japanese Conflict; world peace efforts; race relations; polygamy; drug and alcohol use; missionary policy, training, and preparation; and biographical materials on foreign missionaries. The pamphlets are theologically diverse and represent the cacophony of American theological and ecclesiastical voices that characterized the fundamentalist-modernist controversy of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

One of the highlights in the collection is a section of materials (Books 496-502) related to the 1932 publication of "Re-Thinking Missions" by the Laymen's Foreign Missions Inquiry. These include Speer's personal correspondence with the authors of the text and with the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions regarding their public strategy for responding to the controversial report. Speer later became the major public critic of "Re-Thinking Missions" with his 1934 publication of *Re-Thinking Missions Examined*.

The collection also contains a full set of the first 38 editions of *International Conciliation*, a leading journal in the field of diplomacy that was published by the American Association for International Conciliation under the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace until 1972.

This collection does not contain the complete Robert E. Speer library, but particular volumes within Speer's collection that were perceived to fall within the scope of MRL. In 1949, Dr. R. Pierce Beaver, curator of the Missionary Research Library, worked with Mrs. Speer to choose the books that would be the most beneficial to the study of the missionary enterprise of the North American churches.

**Processing**

The hand-bound books in the Speer collection were placed into folders and are being stored in acid-free records cartons.

A card catalog containing an alphabetical listing of the contents of each "book" in the Speer collection can be viewed at the Burke Library upon request.

**Further Sources**

The Missionary Research Library and the William Adams Brown Ecumenical Library at The Burke Library also contains the following collections related to the work of Robert E. Speer:

[Federal Council of Churches](#)

[Foreign Missions Conference of North America](#)

[Laymen's Foreign Missions Inquiry](#)

[Student Volunteer Movement](#)

The Bryn Mawr College of Bryn Mawr, PA holds 69 boxes of the Speer Family Papers, which contain Robert E. Speer's personal correspondence. The finding aid for this collection can be accessed online at

[http://dla.library.upenn.edu/dla/pacscl/ead.pdf?id=PACSCL\\_BMC\\_USPBmBMCM72](http://dla.library.upenn.edu/dla/pacscl/ead.pdf?id=PACSCL_BMC_USPBmBMCM72)

Several collections from The Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions are held at the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia, PA. The finding aid to Record Groups 31, 82, 83, 129, 174, 175, 258, and 360 can be accessed online at

[http://history.pcusa.org/collections/findingaids/org\\_records.cfm](http://history.pcusa.org/collections/findingaids/org_records.cfm)

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