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James P. Byrd, *Sacred Scripture, Sacred War: The Bible and the American Revolution*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013. Pp. x, 243. ISBN 978-0-19-984349-7.

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Since the American colonists were a religious (generally Protestant) people, it is no surprise that some clergymen and other believers used the Bible to interpret the events of the American Revolution. Indeed, preachers often used Scripture to gauge the meaning of political events. Their sermons sometimes made their way into print as pamphlets. James Byrd (Vanderbilt Univ.), in *Sacred Scripture, Sacred War*, now offers an informative overview of the extant sermons that commented on the Revolution, both while it was occurring and after the fact.

While scholars have previously tried to compile¹ and use² the pertinent sermons, Byrd is the first to provide a systematic overview and introductory analysis of preaching about the American Revolution on both sides of the colonist cause. He is a specialist in the place of theology and biblical interpretation in American history, religion and war, and the history of Baptists and Methodists in America.³

There is something in this book for every perspective on its subject. Those who contend that the American nation was founded on Christian values will find plenty of material to cite and quote. For instance, Byrd describes colonial New England as “sermon-saturated” (20), pointing out that “sermons punctuated all the diverse activities of war” (22). He notes, too, that General George Washington believed chaplains and their sermons were essential to cultivating “a disciplined, moral army” and harnessing “divine weapons” (42). For American colonists, “war and divine providence were inextricably mixed” (25). One signer of the Declaration of Independence, Presbyterian minister John Witherspoon, said “it would be a criminal inattention not to observe the singular interposition of providence ... in behalf of the American colonies” (102). That Thomas Paine, a deist if not outright atheist, cited Scripture in his pro-revolution pamphlet *Common Sense* indicates the importance of the Bible in his place and time—“Paine may not have believed in biblical truth, but he clearly recognized ... that a convincing argument for American patriotism required a dose of scripture” (2).

Those skeptical of the place of religion in the founding of the United States will note the opposing voices. Byrd writes that “What some loyalists called ‘mad preachers’ many patriots considered prophetic messengers in a time of crisis” (44). British Methodists were especially critical of the patriots. In the sermon “A Calm Address to Our American Colonies” (1775), of which 100,000 copies were in print, John Wesley characterized the Revolution as a sinful rebellion. At the same time, some colonists sensed a tension between their faith and the call to arms: “Many people thought it contradictory to preach the Gospel of Christ while also

1. See, esp., Ellis Sandoz, ed., *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730-1805*, 2 vols. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1998). Other works include John Wingate Thornton, ed., *The Pulpit of the American Revolution: Or, The Political Sermons of the Period of 1776* (Boston, 1860); David R. Williams, comp., *Revolutionary War Sermons: Photoreproductions* (Delmar, NY: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1984); John Joachim Zubly, *Revolutionary Tracts* (Spartanburg, SC: Reprint Co., 1972); and Charles Wilbanks, ed. *The American Revolution and Righteous Community: Selected Sermons of Bishop Robert Smith* (Columbia: U South Carolina Pr, 2007).

2. See, e.g., Larry Witham, *A City upon a Hill: How Sermons Changed the Course of American History* (NY: HarperOne, 2007), esp. chapter 4, “Pulpits of Sedition: The Rhetoric of Revolution”; Andrew C. Ross, “The American Revolution and Religion, 1765-1815,” in *Enlightenment, Reawakening, and Revolution, 1660-1815*, ed. S.J. Brown and T. Tackett (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2006); Sarah J. Purcell, *Sealed with Blood: War, Sacrifice, and Memory in Revolutionary America* (Philadelphia: U Penn Pr, 2002); John G. Buchanan, “The Justice of America’s Cause: Revolutionary Rhetoric in the Sermons of Samuel Cooper,” *New England Quarterly* 50 (1977) 101-124; Frank Moore, *The Patriot Preachers of the American Revolution with Biographical Sketches* (New York, 1862); and C.H. Van Tyne, “Influence of the Clergy, and of Religious and Sectarian Forces, on the American Revolution,” *American Hist Rev* 19 (1913) 44-64.

3. His previous publications include *Jonathan Edwards for Armchair Theologians* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Pr, 2008) and *The Challenges of Roger Williams: Religious Liberty, Violent Persecution and the Bible* (Macon, GA: Mercer U Pr, 2002).

preaching aggression on the battlefield” (94). And, too, vehemently anti-Catholic patriots embraced a conspiracy theory that King George III was aligned with the Pope against the American colonies.

Many readers, Christian or not, will puzzle over strange statements and actions and recall L.P. Hartley’s aphorism, “The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.” Few today, for example, would defend the patriots who, seeking a fighting edge, disinterred the body of a renowned Great Awakening preacher:

In September of 1775, five months into the Revolutionary War and five years after [George] Whitefield’s death, a group of Continental Army officers visited Whitefield’s tomb in Newburyport, Massachusetts. They were looking for inspiration for battle, but in an unusual way. They asked that Whitefield’s coffin be opened. When the sexton complied, the officers removed the famous evangelist’s collar and his wristbands and took the relics with them. The army officers may not have known much about Whitefield’s political preaching, or the relative lack thereof, but they knew Whitefield as an evangelist who appealed to the people and resisted traditional authority. (17)

As part of his research for *Sacred Scripture, Sacred War*, Byrd assembled a database of Bible citations in America from 1674 through 1800, when Thomas Jefferson was elected the third president. He identifies no fewer than 17,148 instances in 543 sources.⁴

Byrd divides his volume into six succinct chapters, with an introduction and epilogue. There are end-notes and an index, but unfortunately no separate bibliography. An index of Scriptural citations in the book would have been very useful. Chapter 1 argues that preachers strove to instill martial spirit and deter cowardice in their listeners/readers. Chapter 2 discusses how patriot ministers drew a parallel between the Hebrews escaping pharaonic Egypt and colonial Americans seeking independence from King George. In this analogy, Washington was equated with Moses.⁵ Chapter 3 examines preaching based on the prophetic violence in Judges and Jeremiah. Chapters 4–5 explain how the story of David and Goliath and the idea of Christ making men free were co-opted for the colonial cause. Chapter 5 also has a perceptive treatment of the colonists’ rationalization of revolution in light of the biblical injunction, “Whosoever therefore resisteth the power [of the governing authorities], resisteth the ordinance of God” (117). The patriot ministers, as chapter 6 explains, used the book of Revelation “more to stress militant Christianity than an American millennium” (162).

Byrd argues that preaching based on particular Old Testament passages “pushed the limits of just war theory and gave patriots biblical license to endorse the atrocities of war” (92). He calls for more historical study of how the book of Judges and the prophetic writings were and can be utilized “for their service on battlefields to overcome soldiers’ natural fear of combat” (93). This ventures into the realm of “sacred war” in ways that parallel present-day jihadis’ use of Qur’anic writings to justify violent causes.

One significant weakness of Byrd’s work is the lack of much consideration of the theological soundness of pro-revolution sermons, however dogmatically certain their composers (if not their recipients) may have been about God’s view of the events of their time. Troubling as well is Byrd’s approving mention of *The American Patriot’s Bible*⁶ as an example of the American tradition of turning to Scripture in wartime (in this case, the “War on Terror”). This rather obscure contemporary publication simply reprints the King James version with the addition of short reflections on the connection between Christianity and the history of the United States; it hardly represents the beliefs of the vast majority of American Christians. So, too, some of

4. Table 8.1 in the book’s Appendix (169–70) specifies eight “Most Cited Biblical Chapters (50 or more citations) in the Revolutionary Era (1763–1800)” as follows: Romans 13: Paul on obedience to civil rulers (96 times); Exodus 14–15: Moses and the parting of the Red Sea (75 times); Galatians 5: Paul on the freedom of Christ (67 times); Judges 4–5: Deborah, Jael, and the Curse of Meroz (64 times); 1 Peter 2: Peter on obedience to civil rulers (63 times); 1 Kings 12: Davidic kingdom divided (Rehoboam’s tyranny) (55 times); Psalm 124: David’s thanksgiving for national salvation (54 times); and Matthew 5: Sermon on the Mount (53 times).

5. Melanie Wright, in *Moses in America: The Cultural Uses of Biblical Narrative* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2003), does not cite any such linking of Washington with the Hebrew leader, but Byrd refers his readers to Bruce S. Feiler, *America’s Prophet: How the Story of Moses Shaped America* (NY: Morrow, 2009), for analysis of “the astounding pervasiveness of the story in contemporary politics” (72).

6. Subtitle: *The Word of God and the Shaping of America*, ed. R.G. Lee (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009).

the Revolutionary Era sermons discussed by Byrd very likely were not taken seriously and had little effect on the public at large. We are left to wonder just which sermons may have been normative and which were aberrations even in their own time.

As Byrd himself admits, “Certainly, not everyone paid attention to sermons” (4). This remains true even granting, as he insists, that “the evidence indicates that wartime was primetime for preaching” (4). And what of the sermons that were not published as pamphlets (and were thus lost to posterity) because they were too unsensational to make a profit for the local printer? Undoubtedly, some Christians, whether they favored revolution or not, recognized that at least some of the sermons they heard or read were idiosyncratic and theologically deeply flawed. Failure to address this probability is the most serious shortcoming in an otherwise meticulously researched and provocative book accessible to both general and specialist readers.