Religion and Revolution: A Historiographical Look at Christianity's Influence on the American Revolution

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Historians seek to explain processes of change. In *The Purpose of the Past*, Gordon S. Wood writes, “explaining change through time” always seems “to lie at the heart of historical reconstruction.”¹ Consequently, periods of accelerated change beckon historians to interpret and reinterpret the meanings of the era. The tumultuous years of the American Revolution continue to inspire historical treatises intended to expose the forces, beliefs, and decisions that drove Americans to rebel and then sustained them in that course despite formidable obstacles and terrible setbacks. Historians generally agree that one source of ideological direction and motivation for this event was Christianity. They certainly differ on the manner and extent to which Christianity influenced the Revolution. The consensus of most, however, is that Christianity played a significant role in motivating the general American populace to throw off the chains of Britain’s political tyranny and form a vision for a new nation.

The study of Christianity’s influence on the Revolution is mostly an examination of a grassroots historical phenomenon, a movement among the masses. For that reason, historians, with a few notable exceptions, did not give much attention to this subject before the rise of social history in the 1960s and 1970s. Until then, history was mostly a study of top-down influence. Scholars generally acknowledged Washington, Franklin, Jefferson, Adams, and their companions in the upper cadre of the Revolution as the primary source of Revolutionary ideology as well as the primary agents that caused the Revolution to happen. This led them to focus many of their studies on the Enlightenment ideas that formed the minds of these leading Americans. To some extent, these men certainly were influential. However, the rise of social history increasingly caused historians to acknowledge that a Continental Congress without a

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massive throng of common Americans driven by deep-seated and enduring motivations would produce no revolution at all.

In seeking to find what united and inspired the grassroots rebellion, historians realized two things. First, common Americans did indeed care about political realities and often dialogued about such things as natural rights and contract theories of government. Second, despite the relatively high political literacy of American colonists, the Enlightenment did not influence them as much as it influenced most of America’s political leaders. T.H. Breen notes that many of the Founding Fathers subscribed to forms of Deism. They put their faith in a reasonable God of the Enlightenment. This bundle of ideas, however, “did not resonate convincingly with the militiamen who actually turned out to defend communities like Lexington and Concord.”

Instead, common Americans found much of their direction, courage, motivation, and perseverance in their Christian religion. When historians realized this, the floodgates opened for a new historical endeavor: ascertaining the manner in which Christianity fomented the Revolution and the degree to which it did so.

Most historical work on this subject falls into three chronological groups: pre-1970s, the 1970s, and the decade from 2000 to 2010. However, in order to illuminate more clearly the general findings of these historians, their work groups well into two categories. The first focuses on the idea that ministers helped create a providentialist interpretation of the Revolution that imbued Americans with a sense of purpose and destiny in their war with Britain. The second major category looks at the Great Awakening’s legacy of dissent, including the creation of a cultural framework in which common Americans felt willing to rebel.

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Before looking at these two categories, however, the pre-1970s groundwork demands adequate attention. Throughout the nineteenth century, a Protestant hermeneutic determined American history. In the early 1900s, Progressive-era historians started to view Enlightenment rationalism as the catalyst that shifted around ideas before the American Revolution and created an intellectual and religious climate that made American minds ready to throw off British rule. One example of this new interpretation was Vernon Parrington, who wrote *Main Currents of American Thought* (1927), which won the Pulitzer Prize for history in 1928. In his book, he contends that liberal, enlightened thought got into a battle with Calvinist evangelical Christianity, and it won. Thus, Enlightenment rationalism released the American mind from the bondage of irrational religious experience. It therefore became the basis for the American Revolution.

This remained the standard opinion until Perry Miller wrote *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (1953), in which he challenges the assumptions of his Progressive-era predecessors by arguing that it was instead New England’s religious ideas that created the social atmosphere that gave rise to the Revolution. He argues that two movements divided Puritanism in the eighteenth century. One was Pietism and the other was the Enlightenment. Thus, historians can group many eighteenth-century American thinkers into these two major groups. One of them is religious, and one of them is not. However, Miller argues that both groups, including the unreligious one, found their underpinnings in Puritan thinking. Even the most secular aspects of the Enlightenment in America (as exemplified by leaders like Benjamin Franklin) found its core in the Puritan intellectual system.

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Miller’s successor was a student that he mentored: Alan Heimert. In *Religion and the American Mind* (1966), Heimert divides colonial America into two religious parties: Liberals and Calvinists. He tries to turn upside down the notion that Calvinism’s death brought life to colonial and Revolutionary politics. Instead, he argues that Liberalism was profoundly conservative and reluctant to break from Britain. On the other hand, “evangelical religion” provided pre-Revolutionary America “with a radical, even democratic, social and political ideology.” It inspired colonists toward American nationalism. Heimert goes beyond Miller by saying that Puritanism did not simply decline into separate competing movements that created two halves of the American mind. Rather, evangelical thought provided the push for independence and nationalism, while status quo-seeking Enlightenment-inspired rationalists were latecomers to the revolutionary spirit. Heimert also laid the groundwork for the two major categories of thought. He points out that the themes of many sermons preached by American pastors tended toward stressing the depravity of England and the need for Americans to fight for their freedom and defend America from tyranny. He also argues that the Calvinist groups dissenting the established churches during the Great Awakening succeeded in breaking down the local allegiances of Americans.

Heimert’s work proved to be a launch pad for scholarship. Interestingly, Bernard Bailyn’s seminal work, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967), emerged one year after Heimert’s and hardly mentioned the role of religion. Dissemination of Heimert’s ideas took several years, but it soon inspired a flurry of scholarship on this subject in the 1970s.

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7 Ibid., 242.
8 Ibid., 460, 466.
9 Ibid., 139.
It is now appropriate to begin examining the first major category of scholarship addressing Christianity’s influence on the Revolution. As mentioned before, it mostly involves a study of the ministers who helped create a providentialist interpretation of the Revolution that imbued Americans with a sense of purpose and destiny in their war with Britain. In *The Great Awakening and the American Revolution* (1971), Cedric Cowing argues that the Calvinism of the evangelicals helped convince the populace that God chose them for a special purpose as a nation. He destined them to rise up and form a millennial utopia.\(^{10}\) Even though Enlightenment rationalism might have mobilized the decision-making elite, Calvinist evangelicalism served as “a vital force in all the colonies” to fire the hearts of the populace to go out and make the Revolution happen.\(^{11}\) New Light pastors whose pastoral skills developed in the wake of the Great Awakening used their spontaneous oratory and impassioned rhetoric “to activate the people’s will to resist.”\(^{12}\)

In *Sons of the Fathers* (1976), Catherine Albanese asserts that the revolutionary generation felt compelled to write a uniquely “American” history in order to justify their revolution. They recognized the religious legacy left to them by the people who originally came over from Europe. This enabled them to form what she calls a “myth of origins,” which essentially indicates that the patriots made their history and gave it a meaning conducive to revolution. Regardless of whether this new historical perspective was true, colonial religion played a key role in helping colonists form a new vision for their unique identity.\(^{13}\)

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\(^{11}\) Ibid., 192.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 205.

Similar to Albanese, Nicholas Guyatt’s objective in *Providence and the Invention of the United States* (2007) was to ascertain how Americans came to think that God favored the United States above other nations. He points out that before the years leading up to the Revolution, America already had a providentialist interpretation of its own history. However, this was from a British point-of-view, where they saw themselves as a member of the greater British Empire that was God’s primary tool for bringing about his kingdom on earth. The events leading up to the Revolution changed this. Guyatt notes that Americans responded to British offenses by looking into their past and tracing their own impending greatness. In this process, Americans departed from the providentialism of Britain and created a new providentialism uniquely for America. They rearranged their history to exclude Britain and invent a providential purpose of their own.¹⁴

Mark Noll expounds on the idea of providentialism in *Christians in the American Revolution* (1977). He highlights the idea that Christians in Revolutionary America assumed that God singled them out for special privileges and responsibilities.¹⁵ They increasingly believed Europe was a center of decadence. Meanwhile, God was preparing Americans to be the center of the millennial kingdom. Americans renewed and intensified their “City on a Hill” vision. They increasingly felt “that a successful completion of the war might be the prelude to the visible appearance of the Kingdom of God on earth.”¹⁶ Noll also argues that because of the war, American society in general replaced the church as the center of communal Christian values. This was a result of Americans believing that God was concerned with the entirety of the

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¹⁶ Ibid. 166.
American experience instead of just ecclesiastical expressions. Thus, we see in this a part of the transition from Puritan Christianity to American Christianity.

In that same year, Nathan Hatch published *The Sacred Cause of Liberty* (1977). Similar to Noll, Hatch purports that ministers linked an apocalyptic vision to the cause of American liberty. This instigated Americans to view “the struggle of liberty versus tyranny as nothing less than the conflict between heaven and hell.” Republican ideas influenced American Christianity and produced what Hatch calls “civil millennialism.” This new hybrid religion flowered during the Second Great Awakening. For years, the week-to-week sermons in numerous American congregations (at least in New England) articulated Christian republicanism and thereby convinced New Englanders “that America’s divine election was a logical inference from her commitment to liberty.”

Charles Royster also writes about American providentialism during the Revolution in *A Revolutionary People at War* (1979). He notes that Americans believed God chose them to exemplify the way He wanted people to live together on earth. Thus, God would not want to give them into the hands of men who were collaborating in the spread of tyranny throughout the world. Americans expected sure victory, especially in light of their supposed superior obedience to God, and this expectation “helped both to offset fears of weakness and to avoid guilt for making war.”

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18 Ibid., 174.
19 Ibid., 175.
sinful for Americans to engage in it, “because the alternative – acceding to enslavement – was worse.”21 Instead, they viewed the struggle for independence as a great test of God’s chosen people that would yield to their posterity a free country and God’s promises.22

Thomas Kidd corroborates this idea in *God of Liberty* (2010). He argues that providentialist interpretations of the events surrounding the conflict gave people a sense of purpose and direction. Yet he also points out, with a number of other scholars, that it served as a source of moral and virtuous teaching to sustain Americans during critical seasons of the war. He writes, “From the outset of the crisis with Britain, Patriot leaders and pastors were consumed with the issue of virtue and morality.”23 They believed the British Empire’s glory dimmed because of moral corruption.24 America, therefore, had to be morally pure in order for God to help them preserve their liberty.25 When greed and extortion among merchants and desertions and insubordination among the troops damaged the war effort, Patriot leaders increased their religious pleas for Americans to cling to virtue.26 Military chaplains worked to foster moral and obedient behavior among the troops.27 Pastors used “jeremiads,” or cautionary lectures, to convince Americans that sin brought them their trouble, but godliness would bring them deliverance.28 The Continental Congress even proclaimed days of prayer and fasting in 1774 and 1775 to call on Americans to confess and repent of their sins. Kidd notes, “Even leaders like Jefferson, who did not share the evangelicals’ faith, hoped that a resurgence of religion would

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21 Royster, 15.
22 Ibid., 7, 9.
24 Ibid., 103.
25 Ibid., 105.
26 Ibid., 107.
27 Ibid., 116.
28 Ibid., 82.
help Americans win the war.”

This emphasis on the need for morality and virtue helped build America’s unique identity as a chosen people.

Martin Marty acknowledges in “The American Revolution and Religion: 1765-1815” (2006) that the Revolution impelled and inspired leaders “to make use of mythic and symbolic images in the waging of the war.”

In other words, they realized the need for using providentialist worldview when recruiting troops and sending them into battle. However, he also reins in historians with an apt caution. While before the 1960s, historians tended to overlook the role of religion in triggering and sustaining the Revolution, historians today can easily overemphasize it. He notes that the passion that leads to war always draws on a mixture of motives. Some of these are economic in nature. Others involve the contagious enthusiasm invoked by the common defense of a homeland against a tyrannical invader. Yet, it certainly “helped immensely that so many believers made ‘the sacred cause of liberty’ their own by claiming that a Provident God would bless their efforts, ennoble their sacrifices, and bless their beginnings as a new nation.”

The second major category of scholarship addressing Christianity’s influence on the Revolution involves a study of the Great Awakening’s legacy. Rhys Isaac writes in *The Transformation of Virginia* (1982) that the Awakening served as a crisis of authority that prepared the way for the Revolution among both colonial elites and lower orders. He describes a deep-lying connection between popular evangelicalism and patriot republicanism. Even though contrasts between the values of the two ideologies might be striking, both seem to have met a general need for a revitalization of community in the midst of perceived disorder.

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29 Kidd, 83.
31 Ibid., 505.
32 Ibid., 506.
evangelicals in the Great Awakening brought together believers into church meetings, the patriots came together to sign self-denying “Associations” and committed themselves to non-consumption.\(^{34}\) Thus, the popular movement of the Great Awakening prepared the way for methods of unification during the Revolution.

William McLoughlin agrees with this idea. He argues in “The Role of Religion in the Revolution” (2006) that the Great Awakening “was really the beginning of America’s identity as a nation – the starting point of the Revolution.”\(^{35}\) The forces set in motion during the Awakening broke the undisputed power of religious establishments from Georgia to Maine. Furthermore, it constituted a watershed in the American self-image. The old assumptions about social order and authority that formerly governed colonial society dissolved. The Awakening undermined the old order and established a tradition of dissent.\(^{36}\) McLoughlin also argues that the Revolution actually brought dissenting religious sects “out of their apolitical pietistic shells” and catapulted them into political power.\(^{37}\) Thus, they ceased to be isolated cells and entered the mainstream of national dialogue, where religion proved to be a major stimulus for the American people.\(^{38}\)

T.H. Breen likewise notes in *American Insurgents, American Patriots* (2010) that the Awakening invited ordinary people to challenge the authority of their own ministers, thus establishing a legacy of rebellion. The formation of dissenting congregations gave laymen a voice in religious affairs, wherein colonists “spoke up as they never had done before.”\(^{39}\) The

\(^{34}\) Isaac, 267.


\(^{36}\) Ibid., 149.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 151.

\(^{38}\) McLoughlin, 154

\(^{39}\) Breen, 33.
revivals also instilled in colonists a taste for enthusiasm and feelings, for passionate and emotionally satisfying communal movements.40 Thus, in a world where political considerations often intertwined with religious perspectives, the evangelicalism of the Awakening produced a framework friendly to patriotism.41

The Awakening also prepared a vital form of communication for patriotic use. Jerome Dean Mahaffey asserts this idea in *Preaching Politics* (2007), a study on the rhetorical strategies of George Whitefield. He argues that Whitefield’s preaching during the Great Awakening helped develop a “rhetoric of community” that established a sense of collective identity initially within the church and ultimately within the wider society.42 This yielded a ripe setting for masters of rhetoric. Men like Thomas Paine were thus able to base their arguments on a “system” that their audience respected. Even if Paine did not have the same beliefs as most Americans, he understood his audience and knew what approach was going to be most effective.43

Thomas Kidd, whose recent work thoroughly fits into both of the major categories of scholarship on this subject, also writes that Biblically-minded people needed biblical rhetoric to stir their hearts. No wonder, then, that the great orators and writers of the Revolution, including Patrick Henry, Thomas Paine, and numerous evangelical pastors, employed biblical and evangelical rhetoric to make their political case.44 This was the language of the people. Kidd argues, “Without evangelicalism’s resources for criticizing political power and rousing popular sentiments, the Patriots would never have commanded the allegiance of so many Americans.”45

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40 Breen, 34.
41 Ibid., 32, 35.
42 Mahaffey, 17.
43 Ibid., 239.
44 Kidd, 76, 87, 90.
45 Ibid., 95.
He acknowledges that political ideas and financial matters undoubtedly helped motivate Americans to support revolution, “yet the evangelical tradition supplied spiritual propulsion to the Patriot cause that was unsurpassed by any other element of Patriot ideology.”

A number of scholars argue that both the evangelical “New Lights” and liberal “Old Lights” that emerged from the Great Awakening Christians supported the patriot cause. Derek Davis argues this idea in “Religion and the American Revolution” (1994). He notes that even among those liberal groups who increasingly left behind orthodox Protestantism, the values of the Christian belief system exerted considerable influence. Evangelical pietism as well as and liberal, rationalistic religious perspectives both characterized the Revolutionary debate. Indeed, Davis points out that even though the evangelical New Light dissenters did add a strong component to the Patriot cause, liberal Old Light Christian leaders and their flocks also adorned their teachings in patriotic garb. Even though Old Lights were unimpressed by the emotional enthusiasm of the Great Awakening, they still supported the independence movement. Many rationalist and Enlightenment-influenced Old Lights adopted the widespread opinion that English control of American political, economic, social, and religious life was the main obstacle to positive changes in the colonies. Thus, they decided to unite with the New Lights and many other Americans “in the view that a separation from Great Britain was imperative.” Davis also points out that virtually all Americans adhered to the concept of covenant. Americans believed they had a covenant relationship with England that demanded moral integrity from both parties. Regardless of whether ideas about covenant derived from religious or rationalist sources, “the

46 Kidd, 94.
48 Ibid., par. 28.
Several authors focus on a specific pre-Revolutionary controversy that relates to the legacy of dissent left behind by the Great Awakening. In years preceding the Revolution, a divisive question emerged: should the Church of England impose an Anglican bishop over the churches in America? James Bell writes in *A War of Religion: Dissenters, Anglicans, and the American Revolution* (2008) that this question about an American episcopate became “inextricably linked with the contentious political issues of taxation, trade, and the quartering of troops.” He asserts that the bishop controversy was one of the causes of the Revolution. Britain’s effort to formulate a policy for the colonial English church added more strain to the already tense relationship between the colonies and Britain. Colonial leaders, including John and Samuel Adams, feared the authority of Parliament to enhance and extend the power of the English church. Thus, they decided to absorb the church’s experience into the general rhetoric of complaints against imperial policies. Religious leaders who were already nonconformist after the Great Awakening feared the establishment of an English church hierarchy. The result was an increased participation of the clergy in the war effort.

While the breadth of scholarship on Christianity’s influence on the Revolution seems adequate, its depth demands more attention. Although works like Kidd’s *God of Liberty* provide succinct and lucid arguments on the various ways in which Christianity united and inspired Americans for the Revolution, historians leave the reader with a sense that their work only

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49 Davis, par. 45.  
51 Ibid., 211.  
52 Ibid., xi.  
53 Ibid., xiv.
scratches the surface. For each claim and conclusion, authors usually cite half a dozen or fewer examples. The selection of sources often begs several questions. Why do authors focus on certain geographic areas (indeed, nearly all the studies addressed in this paper focus on New England)? Why do they relegate their studies to certain denominations? Why do they choose certain sermons to analyze over others? At some point, the reader must simply trust the conclusions of the scholar. That so many scholars have agreed on the most fundamental ideas lends weight to their arguments, but it still leaves the uninitiated observer questioning. Until someone produces an exhaustive volume detailing a majority of the evidence available, the question marks will remain.

Another area that beckons further study is the Revolution’s influence on American churches. Mark Noll writes in *The Old Religion in a New World* (2002), “A rich historiography now exists for the question of how the churches and religious rhetoric contributed to the American break from Britain. Less work has been devoted to the impact of the Revolution on churches, even though that is the critical issue for a history of Christianity.”54 This is essentially the reverse of what most historians usually address. When religion pierces into political, economic, and social issues, whether or not those things simultaneously penetrate it demands attention. Whether or not religion bends beneath external pressures and conforms to new standards, producing a hybrid system of belief that eventually differs in major ways from its predecessor, is important for a complete picture of religious history in America. While a handful of authors, notably Mark Noll and Nathan O. Hatch, have devoted scholarship to this issue, the subject remains understudied. It appears unarguable that the ideological wars surrounding the American Revolution caused significant changes in American churches. Perhaps Enlightenment

ideals such as natural rights theories, egalitarianism, the innate goodness of man, the importance of liberty to having a happy life, and progressive utopian visions for society all diffused into churches to form a syncretism that not only shaped American Christianity’s theology during the nineteenth century but became permanent features in the American Christian’s worldview.

Historians largely agree that Christianity played a significant role in motivating the general American populace to throw off the chains of Britain’s political tyranny and form a vision for a new nation. While Enlightenment rationalism provided the primary source of inspiration and ideas for the Revolution’s political leaders, it was not strong enough to unite and motivate the massive throng of common Americans who provided the numbers to make the Revolution a reality. Common Americans found much of their direction, courage, motivation, and perseverance in their Christian religion. When scholars in recent decades realized this underlying source of popular inspiration, they began to lay siege to the daunting task of consolidating enough evidence to define the emotional and intellectual underpinnings that caused tens of thousands of Americans to rebel against England. As with any other subject within the realm of “intellectual history,” accomplishing that task to any degree of certainty is exceedingly difficult. It seems, however, that historians since Alan Heimert’s seminal work in 1966 have been able to make several conclusions. Their work groups well into two major categories. First, they agree that the Great Awakening left behind a legacy of dissent, including the creation of a cultural framework in which common Americans felt willing to rebel. Second, ministers helped created a providentialist interpretation of the Revolution that imbued Americans with a sense of purpose and destiny in their war with Britain. Although historians differ on the extent and manner to which the evidence lends support for these two ideas, their overall conclusion is that Christianity did indeed play a major role in making the American Revolution a success.
Bibliography


