

The *Black Robed Regiment*: Propagandists or Pastors?

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The role of Christianity during the American Revolution has been the subject of widely different historiographical interpretations. Some historians view the evoking of the concepts of the Almighty, Creator, and Providence as mere propaganda; the carefully crafted religious message to connect with an evangelical audience influenced by the Great Awakening. Others view these comments as being genuine expressions of faith within a greater framework which is often referred to as the “Christian founding” of America. In this interpretation, the historian assumes that most of the Founders were deeply and profoundly influenced by their Christian beliefs, almost to the point of attempting to create a Christian, republican theocracy. It is within these two polarized perspectives that a fascinating group of men, referred to as the “Black Robe Regiment” by the British and modern historical groups becomes an extremely interesting study.

These ministers and pastors who vehemently supported the Revolution from their pulpits certainly had influence on their communities and church members. According to the National Black Robe Regiment, the American clergy of the 18th century was largely responsible for the Independence movement in America.¹ They cite several 19th and 20th century historians and publications which claimed that the ideas of the pulpits were the true driving force behind the American Revolution.² When viewed in light of the Christian founding interpretation, these men are religious visionaries (or fanatics), while the secular approach sees them as duplicitous and predatory manipulators.

What is less clear from historical records is which historiographical framework these men’s motivations are best explained by. Were they careful, calculated, and brilliant political manipulators who used their position and religious teachings to support a political agenda that

¹ National Black Robe Regiment

² Ibid.

they personally agreed with, or were they genuine believers who believed that God had chosen them for such a time as this? As one considers these extremes, the answer appears to be far more nuanced than this binary choice, and a third interpretive framework emerges. This third framework suggests that most of these men were simply engaged in the more broad, cultural discussions of the time, which frequently mixed the divine with the secular. Within this group would have been men of varying levels of commitment and different understandings of Christianity. What is even more telling is how many secular figures utilized similar, and almost identical language, leading to the conclusion that the blending of religious and political discourse used by the Black Robe Regiment was actually just common American (and British) language of the 18th century.

During the early stages of the Reformation, Calvin used his interpretation of the Bible to develop a cohesive political theory. In his 4th book, Calvin devotes an entire chapter to the role of civil government. As many of the Americans were Calvinists, several of Calvin's political beliefs were extremely relevant during the Revolutionary Era. Calvin believed that "the spiritual kingdom of Christ and civil government are things very widely separated."³ Despite believing that they were separate from one another, Calvin also believed that Biblical truth could and should be applied to civil government. He argued that taxes are the just revenue of magistrates, but only to be used for the benefit of the common good, and not to enrich the magistrates.⁴ He even believed that rulers who abuse their powers become illegitimate magistrates,⁵ and that

³ John Calvin, "*Institutes of the Christian Religion*" (1536), Book 4, Chapter 20, Section 1

⁴ Ibid, Section 13

⁵ Ibid, Section 24

Christians have a moral obligation to resist evil.⁶ Given Calvin's own theology of political matters, it should not be surprising to find Calvinist ministers engaged in political matters.

In 1755, Samuel Davies preached a sermon meant to rally support for the American and British cause in the French and Indian War. Throughout the sermon, Davies refers to the "Popish" schemes of the French, and clearly connects the French to "Slavery, Tyranny, and Massacre" via the Catholic church. Davies clearly views institutional religious control as being analogous to political tyranny. At the same time, his sermon has a definite sensationalist slant that is reminiscent of propaganda from the period. The language of the sermon is decidedly incendiary, and the opening of the sermon is almost entirely political. His first allusions to the Bible, aside from brief apocalyptic language, is a discussion of Joab and David, and biblical military history. He further claims that it is the only appropriate Christian response to defend one's nation.⁷

What is clear from this sermon is that Davies clearly understood the events which were occurring in the nation at the time to have strong correlations to God's relationship with Old Testament Israel. He quotes exclusively from the Old Testament. Davies appears to subscribe to the idea that the colonial successes on the battlefield are directly related to the righteousness and virtue of the nation. Also of significance to note in Davies's sermon is its pro-British tones, suggesting that the views expressed by Davies are concerning God's relationship with America generally, and not specifically connected to an idea of independence from the British.

John Witherspoon was a signer of the Declaration of Independence, and therefore verifiably biased toward Revolutionary action. What is interesting about Witherspoon, is the

⁶ Ibid, Section 20

⁷Davies. "Religion and Patriotism: The Constituents of a Good Soldier." This discussion of Davies' beliefs in this research paper is based on this 1755 sermon.

exegetical differences in his sermons compared to Davies. Witherspoon explored the idea of Biblical just war theory, and arrived at the conclusion that war in the case of the American Revolution, was indeed justified.⁸ Historian Emory Elliot claims that Witherspoon's exegetical structure ought to be criticized for its loose interpretation of certain passages.⁹ Many of the points that Witherspoon made seem to be consistent with Davies' ideas from two decades earlier. Witherspoon's attempts to justify a war with Britain seems to be much less selective in their interpretation than Davies, who almost pulled ideas at random, when he even ventured into exploring Biblical support. However, Witherspoon was not the only minister or American looking at a Biblical concept of just war theory.

Another such colonial leader was the Congregationalist minister Jonathan Mayhew. One of Mayhew's sermons dealing with just war theory was based on Romans 13, represents a belief that God's laws are higher than man's.¹⁰ This belief is one which is supported by a literal reading of the text, and therefore requires no special application in order to reach the conclusion that obedience to a higher power is of paramount importance. However, the burden of proof to reach the conclusion that civil disobedience is required when dealing with tyrannical or sinful government falls to the preacher. Mayhew sought to establish that the actions of the British government were, in fact, contrary to the decrees of God.¹¹ The exegetical structure of Mayhew's sermon is completely different from Davies, and more polished than Witherspoon's, and was also more sincere in tone.

⁸ Elliot, "The Dove and Serpent: The Clergy in the American Revolution." 191

⁹ Ibid, 191.

¹⁰ Mayhew, "Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers"

¹¹ Ibid.

Once established that obedience to God and civil authority are not necessarily equivalent ideas, Mayhew expressed traditional Calvinist beliefs about the role of a ruler and his citizens.¹²

While some historians looking for a more secular explanation would claim that Mayhew's comments were Lockean in tone, Calvin pre-dates Locke by over a century. It is far more likely that Mayhew's sincerely held Calvinist beliefs were the foundation upon which the sermon's key points were built. Mayhew's conclusion that civil disobedience is required of a repressed people¹³ was both Biblically supported and reinforced by Calvinist tradition.

In a decidedly Enlightenment vein, Mayhew then examines the logic behind the idea that a sovereign monarch should be the ruler of an entire civilization of people, and finds it to be decidedly lacking.¹⁴ Finally, he appeals to a historical study of Charles I and the English Civil War, applying the principles outlined in a rational, Biblical, and Calvinistic context to conclude that the English Civil War was both morally and religiously necessary.¹⁵ Mayhew's argument displays none of the sensationalist beliefs one would expect from propaganda, and seems to represent a genuine attempt to reconcile the principles of Calvin, Locke, and the Apostle Paul, as well as historical understanding into a unified just war theory.

Many other preachers in New England, especially during the early part of the Revolution, believed that it was their moral and spiritual duty to talk to their congregations about war.¹⁶ The primary difference between this war and earlier conflicts was that the war was no longer between Protestant and Catholic, but between America and their own mother country,

¹² Mayhew, "Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers"

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Purcell, "Spread This Martial Fire: The New England Patriot Clergy and Civil Military Inspiration," 626

England.¹⁷ In order to reconcile this issue, the ministers first often pointed to the separatist nature of the founding of the New England colonies.¹⁸ Stressing God's sovereignty, they then viewed the conflict of the times as God's judgement on England.¹⁹ This claim may be dismissed as propaganda, except that this kind of thinking is perfectly harmonious with the jeremiad teachings of a half century earlier, which interpreted political hardships as divine judgement. As an example, upon viewing the way that they treated their slaves, George Whitefield wrote in a letter of caution that the South Carolinians would fall under God's judgement.²⁰ Therefore, this line of thought can be rightly seen as an extension of Calvinist thought in general, and not simply an adaptation which was politically expedient at the time. Even more interesting is that many of the ministers of the time were pulling from secular and historical sources, as well as the Bible, in order to develop their ideas.

This is not to say that there was not a robust discussion among the Calvinist ministers about the conflict between a justified war and Christian pacifism. John J. Zulby was a minister and patriot of unquestioned loyalty to the colonial cause until 1775.²¹ By the time of the 2nd Continental Congress, Zulby's views had changed so dramatically that he was dismissed from the 2nd Continental Congress²² because he had adopted a more pacifistic approach to the Revolutionary War in general.²³ He did not agree with the idea that the colonists should blindly submit to authority, and openly questioned earlier Parliamentary acts, such as the Stamp Act.

¹⁷ Ibid, 627.

¹⁸ Ibid, 627-628.

¹⁹ Ibid, 628.

²⁰ Smith, *A Cautious Enthusiasm: Mystical Piety and Evangelicalism in Colonial South Carolina*, 113

²¹ Schmidt, "The Reverend John Joachim Zulby's "The Law of Liberty" Sermon: Calvinist Opposition to the American Revolution," 350-356

²² Ibid, 356-357.

²³ Ibid, 357-364.

However, by 1775, Zubly was concerned that most of the Revolutionary leaders had lost their heading, and that they were putting too much emphasis on the temporal government, and not enough emphasis on the spiritual condition and final judgement of mankind.

Zubly represents the voice of a conscientious objector to both the British and Americans during the time of the Revolution, the grounds of which are rooted mostly in Christian pacifism, and not in support for the British Crown. In a sense, these 18th century purifiers sought to remove certain secular influences from the theological mainstream of Revolutionary America. His views, however, are not consistent with the historical Calvinistic understanding expressed by clergy like Witherspoon and Mayhew.

American Calvinists were not the only ones to use the Bible to explain the political consequences of the American Revolution, several outspoken British ministers did likewise. Presbyterian minister William Dickson preached sermons concluding that the British government had no cause to be involved in the war.²⁴ He concluded that the cost, as measured in human life, and the even larger cost to civilization, was far too great. Dickson was very concerned that the Indians' pagan beliefs would no doubt reconquer part of Christendom in the fallout of an eventual British victory.²⁵ He also saw Spain as a beneficiary of conflict, meaning that his appeals for peaceful separation were both politically pragmatic as well as rooted in a biblical belief of pacifism.²⁶ John Erskine similarly based his pacifist and conciliatory message toward the American colonists on both Scriptures and reason that compelled him to advocate for a peaceful approach toward the colonists.²⁷

²⁴ Stokes, "British Sermons Favorable to the American Revolution," 133-134.

²⁵ Ibid, 134.

²⁶ Ibid, 135.

²⁷ Ibid, 137.

Other British ministers, such as James Murray actually reached a conclusion similar to Mayhew, accusing the British government of pursuing policies which bordered upon slavery.²⁸ Charles Nesbit reached the same conclusion.²⁹ This demonstrates that the debate about the Revolution was a trans-Atlantic debate which had just as much to do with a Calvinist interpretation of Scripture as it was a political debate. It also makes it impossible to conclude that simply because a minister spoke against the Revolution, that he was doing so due to political motivations. Finally, it illustrates that within the British Empire, it was common to attempt to blend political, historical, and Biblical ideas into one cohesive philosophy of action.

Although the ministers themselves may have had this approach, one must also look at the ministers more directly tied to the revolution, such as the militia chaplains. During the Revolution, the New England states very quickly commissioned chaplains by legislative orders.³⁰ The motivations for the appointments of these chaplains often included both revolutionary and religious zeal.³¹ One must explore the possibility that they were used by the American government to influence the outcomes of the Revolution. There is, however, no evidence that the Continental Congress attempted to use ministers as a political propaganda machine. Historian Charles Metzger takes for granted that the significance of the ministers in rallying and maintaining support for the Revolution.³² He also ascribes both altruistic and propagandist personal motives to the pastors.

Despite this fact, evidence points to the efforts of Congress to reign in and moderate the appointment of the chaplains. Leaders within the Revolutionary movement, including George

²⁸ Ibid, 138-139.

²⁹ Ibid, 139-140.

³⁰ Metzger, "Chaplains in the American Revolution," 33.

³¹ Ibid, 36-37

³² Ibid, 31

Washington, argued for the allowance of each regiment to select its own chaplains.³³ This was in response to the Congressional actions which had begun to usurp control of the chaplain appointment from the states, in the name of efficiency. Although Congress was not attempting to control the message of the chaplains, they ended up heeding Washington's advice in order to avoid even the appearance of attempting to manipulate the religious messages for political purposes. Even within the community of ministers, there is clear evidence that some chaplains took issue with the appointment of others whose views they considered to be heretical, proving that there was a line of compromise that many religious chaplains, who were otherwise willing to support the Revolutionary cause, could not cross.³⁴ In other words, the religious message was of paramount significance, and many chaplains saw their primary function as a religious one. This sort of idealism is not often seen in propagandists accustomed to saying whatever needs to be said.

Historian Patricia Bonomi claims that the attempt to separate the religious and political views of the Americans is misleading and misguided.³⁵ She asserts that the two views are inseparable, and in many ways it is impossible to even determine where one ends and the other begins.³⁶ This argument fits the Mayhew and Witherspoon defenses of the American Revolution in a Biblical context well, but requires further proof of the prevalence of Christian ideas within contemporary secular society. Did politicians utilize Biblical concepts as frequently as ministers used political ideas? The answer is "yes."

³³ Ibid, 40-41

³⁴ Ibid, 34.

³⁵ Bonomi, "Hippocrates' Twins": Religion and Politics in the American Revolution."

³⁶ Ibid, 138.

Politicians also explored the idea of a Biblical just war argument, like Supreme Court Justice John Jay. In two letters written in 1816 and 1818, Jay outlined his own understanding of the American Revolution in both political and religious terms. Jay began by stating an obvious position, that wars waged for avarice and personal gain are Biblically untenable³⁷. However, he quickly transitions to a defense of justifiable wars. To substantiate the claim that there is such a thing as a just war, Jay evaluates Old Testament examples of wars approved of by God. His first letter concludes that while peace is preferable, war is not prohibited by Scripture, citing references from the Old and New Testaments.³⁸ He also concludes that there is reason to believe that warfare is permitted by God in the correct circumstances.³⁹

In his second letter, Jay proves that his exegetical thinking differs significantly from Witherspoon and Davies. Jay clearly delineates between Old and New Testaments, demonstrating that Jesus reinterpreted many Old Testament principles like “eye for an eye” in new ways such as “turn the other cheek.”⁴⁰ However, Jay also understands both Testaments to represent a consistent moral law, and then points to sanctioned military action by God against Israel’s enemies as being necessarily consistent with that greater moral law.⁴¹ According to Jay, “. . .the right to wage just and necessary war is admitted, and not abolished, by the gospel.”⁴² He goes on to say:

Being subjects of his spiritual kingdom, they are bound in that capacity to fight, pursuant to his orders, with spiritual weapons, against his and their spiritual enemies. Being also subjects and partakers in the rights and interests of a temporal or worldly state or kingdom, they are in that capacity bound,

³⁷ Jay, “Letter to John Murray, October 12, 1816”

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Jay, ““Letter to John Murray, April 15, 1818”

⁴² Ibid.

whenever lawfully required, to fight with weapons in just and necessary war, against the worldly enemies of that state or kingdom.⁴³

Jay therefore argued that religiously justified wars are politically necessary, effectively blurring the lines between religion and politics, while applying Enlightenment logical reasoning to Biblical principles.

Jay articulately demonstrates a rational, Biblical basis for war, devoid of any passionate appeals to violence which would be typical of propaganda. This document alone does not prove that Jay's rational defense was typical of most ministers of the time, as Jay was not a minister by profession, but it does prove that there were those in colonial America who found an earnest and reflective Biblical basis for war without what Elliot referred to as "exegetical aerobics."⁴⁴

The blurring of political and religious views of Revolutionary War America is further demonstrated by Thomas Jefferson, who is often cited as the originator of the concept of a separation of church and state. According to Elliot, Thomas Jefferson clearly used Biblical ideals in order to connect with American sentiments, evident in both his personal writings as well as symbolism used in national icons.⁴⁵ Once again however, by evaluating Jefferson's other writings, it is likely that he was a true believer of his public ideas. In their letter to President Jefferson, the Danbury Baptists expressed concern that the individual legislatures of the States were still able to establish churches.⁴⁶ They had just cause for expecting Jefferson to be sympathetic to their position, due to the fact that he had been instrumental in the passage of a law

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Elliot, "The Dove and Serpent: The Clergy in the American Revolution."

⁴⁵ Ibid, 187-188.

⁴⁶ Danbury Baptist Association, "Letters Between the Danbury Baptists and Thomas Jefferson."

disestablishing religion in Virginia in 1786. They also rightly pointed out that the prohibition on the separation of church and state applies to the federal, not the state governments.⁴⁷

In his reply, Jefferson seems to side-step the issue. On one hand, he acknowledges that the right of conscience is a natural right, and that all people should be allowed to worship God as they choose.⁴⁸ However, Jefferson also promises very little, other than apparently to attempt to see that other states are guided toward laws similar to the one which already existed within Virginia.⁴⁹ Many historians make the mistake of assuming that Jefferson was ambivalent toward religion. Jefferson held and believed that Christian morality had a key role in the new governments which were being formed among the states.⁵⁰ In 1785, Madison introduced a bill, probably written by Jefferson, which was intended to punish Sabbath breakers and those who disturbed worship services.⁵¹ So while Jefferson certainly opposed the tenants of an established church, he also saw a place for Christian morality and religion within the American political sphere.

In his Farewell Address of 1796, George Washington, who was normally careful of public displays of religion, took the Biblical concept of 2 Chronicles 7:14 when he asked rhetorically “Can it be that Providence has not connected the permanent felicity of a nation with its virtue?”⁵² Alexis de Tocqueville remarked during the 1830’s that:

I do not know whether all Americans put faith in their religion, for who can read into men’s hearts?

But I am sure that they believe it necessary for the maintenance of republican institutions. This is not

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Jefferson, Thomas, "Letters Between the Danbury Baptists and Thomas Jefferson."

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Dreisbach, "A New Perspective on Jefferson's Views on Church-State Relations: The Virginia Statute for Establishing Religious Freedom in Its Legislative Context." 186-187.

⁵¹ Ibid, 188-189.

⁵² Washington, George, "Farewell Address."

an opinion peculiar to one class of citizens or to one party, but to a whole nation; it is found in every rank of society.⁵³

Senator Mike Lee (Utah) notes that the first four presidents prayed in their inaugural addresses and three of the same issued proclamations of fasting and prayer.⁵⁴ Adams institutionalized the Puritan faith in the Massachusetts state constitution following their independence from the British.⁵⁵ Even the worldly Franklin repeatedly and emphatically used Christian language during his last speech to the Constitutional Convention.⁵⁶

The extent to which Christian terminology, language, and ideas were integrated into the normal, secular, political discourse of the Revolutionary Era is most obviously noted in Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*. Thomas Paine, a later avowed atheist, employed arguments against the British monarchy based in Scriptural accounts. Paine discusses Gideon and Samuel, and the warnings of these two accounts against monarchy.⁵⁷ He goes into an exhaustive textual analysis of Biblical teachings in order to establish that God is not merely ambivalent toward monarchial rule, He is vehemently against it.⁵⁸ While some historians will try to claim that Paine was simply using Biblical propaganda in order to advance his point, it is worth noting that nothing that Paine's selected texts are not only appropriate, but his methodology is exegetically sound. There is not an element of sensationalism or misapplied truths as is common in other propaganda pieces, so while Paine was not a Christian, his use of Scripture in *Common Sense* both intellectually and doctrinally sound.

⁵³ Tocqueville, in *Our Lost Constitution: The Willful Subversion of America's Founding Document*, 100

⁵⁴ Lee, *Our Lost Constitution: The Willful Subversion of America's Founding Document*, 100

⁵⁵ Ibid, 101.

⁵⁶ Franklin, "Constitutional Convention Address on Prayer."

⁵⁷ Paine, Thomas, *Common Sense*, of Monarchy and Hereditary Rule

⁵⁸ Ibid.

The inclusion of Christian ideas within secular issues was not a revolutionary idea in Great Britain either. In his famous work, *Principia*, Isaac Newton described the complexity of the universe: “This most beautiful system of the sun, planets, and comets, could only proceed from the counsel and dominion of an intelligent and powerful Being...”⁵⁹ Even Charles Darwin’s *The Descent of Man* includes a lengthy discussion on the origins of the belief in God and source of morality, in a text primarily meant to explain the origins of man from a scientific perspective. One might expect that in such a work, Darwin would take the opportunity to denounce Christianity completely. Yet, despite the overall thesis of the book, Darwin takes for granted that:

The question is of course wholly distinct from that higher one, whether there exists a Creator and Ruler of the universe; and this has been answered in the affirmative by the highest intellects that have ever lived.⁶⁰

What these two seminal scientific works demonstrate is that, even within scientific spheres, the acknowledgement of the sovereignty of God was commonly accepted and discussed using Christian terminology.

So Bonomi’s assessment of the relation between religion and politics is the most historiographically correct: It is quite impossible to ascertain where religion ended and politics began for the ministers of the 18th century British world, just as the transition between secular ideas and religion was equally indiscernible among politicians and scientists.

⁵⁹ Newton, Isaac, *Principia*

⁶⁰ Darwin, Charles, *The Descent of Man*, 65.

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