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Prominent Biblical Themes During the Revolutionary War

Jacob Jones

Harding University, jjones52@harding.edu

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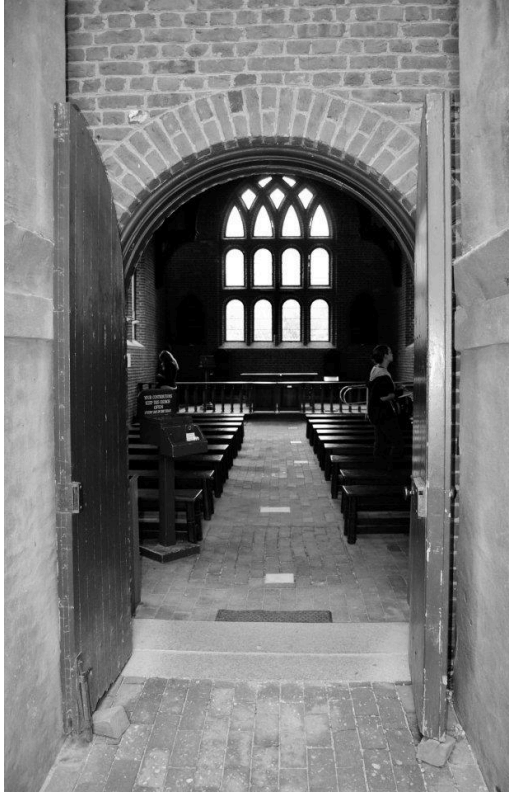
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Jacob Jones is a Senior from Murray, Kentucky and will graduate in December 2021 with a Social Science Education major. He is a co-leader of a men's Bible study group on campus, participant in White County's jail and prison ministry, and active member in Beta Omega Chi. His major interests include history and Christianity, and his hobbies include running, reading, and discussing theology while having a nice cup of coffee with close friends. He plans to become a history teacher and football coach.



Church in Jamestown

PROMINENT BIBLICAL THEMES DURING THE REVOLUTIONARY ERA

By Jacob Jones

One of the few things that unite humanity across all ages and cultures is religion. From the beginning of humanity, religion has been a central focus in the lives of humans. Religion has allowed humanity to find purpose in life and to strive to live good and moral lives. Religion has taken many forms, from polytheistic religions like Hinduism, to monotheism, examples for which can be found in all three of the Abrahamic faiths.

In the West for almost two millennia, Christianity has been, at least in name, the central religious belief system. Christianity in the West has not gone unnoticed. From hospitals, to education, to even private charity, Christianity has played a role in the founding and shaping of all of these. However, Christianity, just like other belief systems, can be used to advance political, national, and personal agendas as well. This can perhaps be seen most clearly in the area of war. Examples abound of religious belief being used to attack another people group, based on the sole reason of differing faiths. In Christianity, perhaps the most popular example can be seen in the Crusades in the Middle Ages, where Christians and Muslims went to war for possession of the Holy Land. During these conflicts, each side tends to use their respective divine texts to justify and encourage war on the other group.

Even from the beginning of its independence, the United States has done this too. Towards the end of the 18th century in British North America, the Bible was proclaimed from predominantly Puritan pulpits to encourage the colonists in the upcoming war against Great Britain. Prominent themes espoused from Scripture that were most used were America as a new Israel, the derogation of Great Britain as evil, and the Providence of God. All three were used to encourage all Christians believers to take part in going to war against Britain, assuring them that

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their cause is just and will rightly win, because ultimately, God is the one who is on their side.

The Puritan faith had its beginnings in Great Britain. During the 16th century, the Puritans emerged as a Christian alternative to the seemingly corrupt state Anglican church. The Puritans strived to rid the church of evil and to also, as their name suggests, make it purer. However, opposition to the state religion didn't sit well with the Church of England and so, the Puritans became increasingly persecuted. This only strengthened their zeal to the point where a distinct branch of Puritans emerged and called themselves Separatists, emphasizing the desire to separate completely from the Anglican church. The Separatists faced tension with moderate Puritans, who wanted to reform the church instead. Due to the increasing persecution and sectarianism emerging within its own faith, the Separatist Puritans set sail for Holland in 1607.

This didn't last long because Holland quickly became too secular for the religious group known for its purity. By 1620, they were ready to sail to Virginia. Unfortunately, due to acclimate weather, their ship the *Mayflower*, was steered off its course and landed in Massachusetts. Needing a new set of laws to govern themselves, the passengers aboard the *Mayflower* wrote a compact, essentially a contract. Though the Puritans made up less than half of the passengers on board, the religious determination can be seen in the what would be known as the Mayflower Compact. William Bradford, future governor of the Plymouth colony, says in it the colonist's purpose for sailing: "Having undertaken for the Glory of God, and Advancement of the Christian Faith, and the Honour of our King and Country..."¹

However, Puritan Separatists were not the only branch of Puritans that made their way into British North America. By 1630, mainline Puritans would embark on their journey from Great Britain to Massachusetts, in hopes of greater religious freedom, like their more zealous brethren a decade before. A clearer intent for their settlement

¹ *The Mayflower Compact.*

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could not be made from what leader John Winthrop heralds in his sermon, *On Christian Charity*, on the voyage there. He proclaims to his comrades, “For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill...”² Winthrop challenged the soon to be colony to live out the words of Christ on the Sermon on the Mount to the Native Americans, whom they would soon encounter, and to the world as a whole.

The Puritans brought with them a distinctly European faith. Receiving their faith from the Reformation, Puritans identified exclusively with Reformed theology, or perhaps more simply known as Calvinism.³ The tenants of reformer John Calvin would be the basis for what Puritans taught and practiced. Calvin was set apart from among more popular theology at the time, called Armenianism, which derives its name from Dutch theologian, Jacob Arminius.⁴ Calvin placed high emphasis on the total depravity of man, the unconditional election of the Saints, a limited atonement of Christ’s sacrifice, the irresistible, all-powerful grace of God, and the perseverance of the elect, being sealed by God for all eternity. For Puritans, the cause of Christ and Christ alone would be the reason for their settling, not other motives that other colonists would pursue, such as the desire to build up a new Rome.⁵

Throughout the next several decades, new colonies would begin to emerge as havens for religious outsiders, including Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island. From these few examples, it is clear

² John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity,” 1630, https://www.winthropsociety.com/doc_charity.php.

³ George Mckenna, *The Puritan Origins of American Patriotism* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2007), 44, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1njmpt.6.

⁴ Martin E.P. Seligman, *Does Character Matter?: Essays on Opportunity and the American Dream*, (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), 11, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7864/j.ctt155j43w.6>.

⁵ Philip Gorski, *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2017), 13, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvc77fnk.9>.

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that Christianity was a driving influence for much of the colonies. However, it would be the Puritans, largely in the New England colonies, who would be the religious voice for the colonies in Revolutionary War, and whose Calvinism would be the theological bulwark from which to base the war on.

Before the Revolution ignited, the American colonies began to view themselves as a new Israel, a “peculiar people”⁶, who had a special relationship with God. Alexis de Tocqueville, a French diplomat who wrote of his nine-month journey from the East coast towards the Western frontier, said this of colonial law codified in 1650:

The lawmakers of Connecticut turned their attention initially to penal legislation for the composition of which they had the bizarre idea of using biblical texts. ‘Whosoever shall worship a God other than the Lord shall be put to death.’ This was their opening statement. After that, ten or twelve similar measures taken verbatim from Deuteronomy, Exodus, and Leviticus.⁷

Other nations, including the tribes already living in North America, were cut off from this privilege. Indian tribes were viewed as savages, in desperate need of taming from white civilization, something de Tocqueville saw as a terrible irony coming from the most successful experiment in democracy at the time.⁸ George Mckenna, a Revolutionary era historian, argues that the view of America as a new type of ancient Israel can be traced to colonial Puritanism.⁹

In the context of settlement and expansion, the tenants of their theology go like this: just as Israel entered the wilderness to start a new

⁶ I Peter 2:9

⁷ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Gerald Bevan (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 49.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 392-396.

⁹ George Mckenna, *The Puritan Origins of American Patriotism*, (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2007), 49, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1njmpt.6?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.

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journey as a nation living in special covenant with God, the colonists are now entering a barren wilderness, starting the same journey the Israelites of old did. If the colonists were to be successful in living through the wilderness and living long enough to reach future dreams of civilization, they would have to be faithful to God, their covenant partner. For Puritan colonists, the similarities to their situation and that of ancient Israel was more than mere coincidence. The Puritans, for example, had just left their own type of Egypt by leaving England and Holland due to religious persecution and were now looking for freedom to worship God as their conscience saw fit.

Later Americans would take the idea of the United States in covenant partnership with God and make it the focal point of all domestic policy. This “manifest destiny”¹⁰, as it would be called, was the plan that God had ordained for the colonists to have success in expanding West, due to living in holiness and conquering unholy pagans. The colonial Puritan experience was not the only thing that contributed to viewing themselves this way. Religious revivals and calls to personal holiness would contribute to it, like the Great Awakening. From the 1730s and 40s, the Great Awakening prepared a mental framework for the colonists of righteousness leading to national blessing and unrighteousness leading to national curses that would give indispensable motivation during the Revolutionary War.

Prominent Calvinist, Jonathan Edwards, headed the revival and thus, propagated its religious attitude. Though Edwards’ most famous (or infamous) sermon, *Sinners in the Hand of Angry God*, has gained popularity throughout the centuries because of its depiction of God’s wrath, any educated reader of Edwards will know that the theme of this sermon is in the minority of topics he proclaimed, with the vast majority of them having to deal with the joy and glory of God. This excerpt from a sermon titled *Ruth’s Resolutions* given by Edwards in April 1735

¹⁰ James McPherson, “*Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*,” (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1988), 48.

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shows this vividly where he proclaims that the true happiness can only be found in the God of Israel.

Happiness is nowhere else to be had, but in their God, and with their people. There are that are called gods many, and lords many. Some make gods of their pleasures; some choose Mammon for their god; some make gods of their own supposed excellencies, or the outward advantages they have above their neighbors: some choose one thing for their god, and others another. But men can be happy in no other God but the God of Israel: he is the only fountain of happiness.¹¹

The idea of personal holiness and being a covenant people did not just apply to the Puritans. Historian James A. Monroe says this about the Great Awakening: “The revival was most powerful in New England but flared across the colonies. This first trans American experience rekindled the divine mission in the new world.”¹² Edwards was postmillennial in his eschatology and this would be a spark that would ignite colonial America into needed change, spiritual and temporal.¹³ Postmillennialism is the belief that the world would progress towards an eventual state of peace that would last for a thousand years, to prepare for the Second Coming of Christ. This is opposed to a premillennial view, which states that the world will progress towards sin and depravity before the second coming of Christ. According to this view, Christ’s coming is the event that triggers a thousand years of peace, not the

¹¹ Jonathan Edwards, “*The Works of President Edwards in Four Volumes*”, vol. 4 (New York: Leavitt and Allen, 1856), 415, Google Books.

¹² James A Monroe, “*Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History*,” (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2003), 100, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1npxmb.8>.

¹³ Dan Papsdorf, “Revelation Ignored: Newspapers and Eschatology in Colonial America, 1690-1775,” *Fairmount Folio: Journal of History* vol. 11 (2009): 10

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Church working to bring the Kingdom of God onto Earth. But because this eschatology emphasized the role of humanity and the human responsibility for peace and progress, their view of the end of the world influenced their action in the present.¹⁴ And according to many, America needed to change its sinful ways if it was ever to live out its self-imposed mandate as a new Israel, especially when the colonists were on the brink of war.

Several revolutionary era pastors were in disgust over the vileness of American life at the time. Vigilance to holiness was emphasized on the American life. Jacob Green, an 18th century politician and religious orator, constantly made illusions to America as Israel in the Book of Judges.¹⁵ In this specific book of the Bible, Israel faces a constant cycle of sin, repentance, and rescue, only to lead to eventually sin again. Green argued that the colonists would lose their freedom and the approval of God, similar to how Israel did, if they do not repent and live a holy life. It was constantly pressed onto American minds that God eventually sent in tyrants and oppressors, in the likes of Babylon and Assyria, to punish His people for living a sinful life and not obeying His commands.

Throughout the Book of Judges, Israel would be oppressed and enslaved for decades at a time for its sin. After repenting to God, He would rescue Israel from their oppressors through a military conflict. Thus, a pattern was quickly established: If Israel lost a battle, it was because of sin; if they won, it was because they were righteous. With a war with Great Britain looming, the outcome would once and for all

¹⁴ *Unfolding Theology*. “Victory in Christ: The Hope of Postmillennialism.” July 23, 2019. Video, 12:23. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ww46xB5Qtk0>

¹⁵ S. Scott Rohrer, “*Jacob Green’s Revolution: Radical Religion and Reform in a Revolutionary Age*,” (University Park, Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2014), 140, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/j.ctv8j49r.11>.

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declare in the minds of the colonists if America was truly living out its identity as God's chosen people.

Like Green, John Witherspoon was another outspoken critic of the British and American backsliding. Witherspoon was listed in a letter from Ambrose Serle, an authority on Calvinism, as belonging to a particularly violent group of New York ministers who helped ignite the war with Great Britain.¹⁶ Witherspoon delivered one of his most popular sermons that dealt with the purpose of war on May 17, 1766. He states:

The wrath of man praiseth God, as it is the instrument in his hand for bringing sinners to repentance, and for the correction and improvement of his own children. Whatever be the nature of the affliction with which he visits either persons, families, or nations; whatever be the disposition or intention of those whose malice he employs as a scourge; the design on his part is, to rebuke men for iniquity, to bring them to repentance, and to promote their holiness and peace.¹⁷

By and large Witherspoon emphasized sin and the need for holiness from the colonists much more than Jacob Green did. Green was a Christian but had a great ability to shift his tone and message while speaking to different audiences, depending on if they were religious or not. For Witherspoon, the greatest chance for the success of liberty was one “who is most sincere and active in promoting true undefiled religion, and who sets himself with the greatest firmness to bear down on

¹⁶ Leonard J. Kramer, “Muskets in the Pulpit: 1776-1783,” *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society* 32, no. 1 (Spring, 1954): 229-30, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23325210>.

¹⁷ John Witherspoon, “The Dominion of Providence Over the Passions of Man,” 1776, <https://oll.libertyfund.org/pages/1776-witherspoon-dominion-of-providence-over-the-passions-of-men-sermon>.

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profanity and immorality of every kind.”¹⁸ From the very beginning, America’s identity as a new Israel shaped how they behaved and also was instrumental in how they viewed the war against Great Britain.

If America was destined to be the chosen elect of God, then who was to be their enemy? Or to put in Biblical terms, who was to be the Antichrist who would challenge and try to thwart the plans of the elect? The colonists could look no further than to Great Britain. Thomas Paine, in his revolutionary pamphlet, *Common Sense*, even saw the distance between Great Britain and the colonists as Divine proof that Great Britain was to not have authority or power over the colonists, and that it would be war if they tried.¹⁹ Paine wasn’t alone in his view of seeing the colonists and Great Britain primed for a seemingly eternal conflict. Many Revolutionary era historians agree that this was the predominant view of many colonists.²⁰ However, before war between the two broke out, rising tensions could be traced to even the Great Awakening.

The distinct difference between the Great Awakening and lesser known revivals at the time was the appeal towards the common man. Emphasis by preachers like Edwards and George Whitfield emphasized the importance of the heart over the mind in response to conversion. In his book on emotionalism in Christianity, Edwards says this: “As there is no true religion where there is nothing else but affection, so there is no true religion where there is no religious affection.”²¹ This emphasis led to the Great Awakening to be characterized by its critics, mostly clergy, as too emotional. In fact, a division of the Puritan church can be seen from this movement as those who sided with the revival called themselves

¹⁸ S. Scott Rohrer, “*Jacob Green’s Revolution: Radical Religion and Reform in a Revolutionary Age*,” (University Park, Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2014), 141, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/j.ctv8j49r.11>.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 143.

²⁰ Melvin B. Endy, Jr., “Just War, Holy War, and Millennialism in Revolutionary America,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (Winter, 1995): 3, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1919608>.

²¹ Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, Part 1, <http://www.leaderu.com/cyber/books/religaffect/rapt1sec3.html>.

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New Lights and those who were against it as Old Lights. While the New Lights were emphasizing the heart, the Old Lights were sure to emphasize order, authority, and Bible study as the means to follow God. Because of the lack of emphasis on the mind and religious authority from the New Lights, common people flocked to them. Old Lights did not take well to seeing their people run to preachers teaching emotionalism. Their authority was undermined, and they had lost influence.

Perhaps the biggest role reversal can be seen in who was viewed as elect and who was viewed as damned. Common Calvinist belief held that individuals were saved by the choosing of God alone, and that one could not work to earn salvation. However, one need to prove that they were genuinely elect, so interestingly enough, Calvinists became known for their emphasis on good works and benevolence. That leads to a question: how could one tell if they had done enough good works and worked hard enough? This answer came to be reflected in the marketplace and business. Those who had successful businesses and enterprises had been rewarded by God for their work and ingenuity. Unfortunately, this led to distinctions between elect and non-elect be based on class alone. Before the Great Awakening the rich were the elect and the poor were the damned; after it, the opposite was true. The Great Awakening taught colonial America to distrust authority and wealth of all types and thus eventually lead to tensions with Great Britain.

The shift of religion into the political sphere can be seen in the middle of the 18th century in places like Connecticut and Virginia. In these states, clashes between Old and New Lights were particularly divisive. In 1755, New Light politician John Woodward, told his constituents to vote for the candidate that was going to support religious and political rights alike.²² Thus began the emergence of religious and political ties into one faction. Historian James Monroe makes the same claim in his book on the role of sin in American politics:

²² James A Monroe, "*Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History*," (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2003), 110, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1npmzb.8>.

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The revivals legitimated conflict; the religious fervor mobilized challenges to authority into the political process. When the crown finally took a sustained interest in colonial affairs it discovered a politics biased toward resisting authority.²³

The colonists had already had a long history of resisting authority, even of the religious stripe. As most were predominantly Protestant, the colonists were generally anti-Catholic. Because of the violent history between the two groups of Christians, each side would paint each other as the Antichrist, or some other devilish figure. However, by the time of the Revolution, we see this imagery not solely being used to describe those in Rome anymore. In 1776, preacher Samuel Sherwood, great-nephew of Jonathan Edwards, preached a sermon titled, *The Church's Flight into the Wilderness* and said:

Whether there be a reference to the corrupt system of tyranny and op-pression, that has of late been fabricated and adopted by the ministry and parliament of Great-Britain, which ap-pears so favourable to popery and the Roman catholic interest, aiming at the extension and establishment of it, and so awfully threatens the civil and religious lib-erties of all sound protestants.²⁴

Throughout the rest of his sermon, Sherwood makes the comparison to Great Britain as the whore of Babylon described in the book of Revelation, a character who is said to kill and persecute the saints of God. This idea of going to war against the Antichrist went hand in hand with the postmillennial eschatology that the colonists had that was mentioned earlier. The Revolutionary War was to be a grandiose event that pitted God's people against the kingdom of Satan, with the

²³ Ibid., 112.

²⁴ Samuel Sherwood, "The Church's Flight into the Wilderness," 1776, <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1021&context=etas>.

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saints arising victorious to usher in a thousand-year reign of peace before the return of Christ. All in all, the colonists turned the against the establishment of Great Britain, lessons learned during the Great Awakening, and began to describe their mother country as evil and of the devil, much like they had Catholics in previous generations.

With the Revolutionary War quickly approaching, the colonists had begun to view themselves as a new Israel, God's chosen people, while at the same time began to view their mother country as the Antichrist, and shifted claims formerly attributed to Catholics and the Pope to Great Britain and the Crown. But how were they to prove their thesis? The answer would lie in the outcome of the events, otherwise known as the Providence of God. As mentioned earlier, many colonists, particularly the Puritans, were heavily influenced by their Reformed theology, which placed a high emphasis on the nature of God. To the Puritans, God was in control to the point that He handpicked those who would receive salvation and passed over those who would not.

Reformed Puritans viewed God as totally sovereign and some even believed that God actively decreed everything that has or will ever happen, including atrocities like war. This can be clearly seen in a popular sermon from Robert Smith in 1775. Smith heralded:

Were there no other evidences of the Being and Providence of the Almighty God, then those which observation and experience point out; the manifestations of a wise and merciful Superintendence are very clear and demonstrable—God hath not left himself without a witness in any part of his Creation,—in the wonderful contrivance of the universe—and the wise disposal of its several parts;—in the support of that Nature that he commanded into being;—and in his care of those Creatures he called forth to life and happiness.²⁵

²⁵ C.P. Seabrook Wilkinson, "A Declaration of Dependence: Robert Smith's 1775 Humiliation Sermon," *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 100, no. 3 (Summer 1999): 227, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27570386>.

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The colonial argument was that as Creator of the world, God would naturally be actively involved in his creation. Clergyman George Duffield would exclaim the popular sentiment that God is actively involved in the dealings of all mankind. However, Clergyman like Duffield could not remain neutral, but found it necessary to proclaim from the Scriptures and the realities of the natural world that the Providence of God would work in the favor of the colonists, and not the Antichrist British.²⁶ This was easy to do when things were going well in the war, but what about when things went bad? The usual tactic during troubling times in the war of Independence was to encourage the colonists to persevere, that like Israel of old, the colonists were being purified and refined by fire. To colonial preachers, it wasn't the testing of the American spirit that was to be worried, it was if America could persevere through the test of Almighty God. The punishment that the colonists took from the British was viewed as a collective punishment from sin.

Like mentioned earlier before, prominent figures like John Witherspoon and Jacob Green appealed to losses from the British as signs that America needed further repentance and that God would punish His new elect, America, the same way He punished Israel for her idolatry in generations past. However, positive progress against the British were sure signs that the Almighty was about to deliver the colonists from the hands of the evil British. A prominent example of this can be seen the storm that Washington was able to go through to be able to find the Hessians.²⁷ Nevertheless, Americans battled the nature of providence and what it meant for them collectively. The British were appealing to the

²⁶ Leonard J. Kramer, "Musketts in the Pulpit: 1776-1783," *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society* 32, no. 1 (Spring, 1954): 242, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23325210>.

²⁷ Leonard J. Kramer, "Musketts in the Pulpit: 1776-1783," *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society* 32, no. 1 (Spring, 1954): 243, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23325210>.

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same God the colonists were and were appealing to Scripture just as ardently as the colonists were. Both sides were equally as passionate for the glory of God, but one side would have to lose.

This tension highlights the difficulty of understanding providence that Americans have always faced.²⁸ What is clear is that the colonists viewed their highly unlikely victory over the British Empire as proof that the hand of God was for them, for in their minds, it would've taken a miracle to win the war. The fledgling country would take the proof of the Providence of God for them and use it to justify countless actions throughout its history, good or bad, and this even extends to the present day.

It is fair to say that preachers across the colonies during the Revolutionary War appealed to the idea of America as a new Israel, the British as the Antichrist, and that the Providence of God was for the good of all Americans, as ways to influence and encourage the colonist cause. These ideas, whose roots come from early Puritans and become more prominent during the Great Awakening, have had a profound impact on American history ever since the Revolution. America wasn't the first and definitely will not be the last of countries to use Christianity and religion as ways advance national and political agendas.

This hard truth does not negate the other truths of Christianity and that it has had a profound impact on the world and specifically, the West. These Judeo-Christian values have had tremendous impact on how the West views the sovereignty of the individual, the rights of the individual before the state, and of course, the tremendous benevolence and generosity this worldview has brought forth from its adherents. If the Founding Fathers of the United States, despite their faults, ushered in an unprecedented nation that has made leaps and bounds of its goal towards a just society of all of its citizens, and the world as a whole should appreciate the impact for good that the US has made in the history of the

²⁸ John D. Carlson and Jonathan H. Ebel, "*From Jeremiad to Jihad: Religion, Violence, and America*," (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), 94. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pn5n4.10>.

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world. All in all, if history teaches society anything, it's to see the greater good in spite of the evil, and to find ways to maximize good while limiting evil that is inherent in all individuals and society as a whole.