When a hurricane ravaged the waters off of eastern Newfoundland on September 9, 1775, churning waves up to 30 feet, the devastation was enormous. Four thousand sailors drowned, most of them from Ireland and England. The British Royal Navy lost two armed schooners. When word reached the American colonies, William Foster, a Presbyterian minister, eagerly fit what became known as the “Independence Hurricane” into an ancient and venerable typology. “Pharaoh’s chariots and his hosts were cast into the sea,” Foster preached to American soldiers; “they sank as lead in the mighty waters.”

The American Revolution was by no means the first time preachers wielded the Bible to justify armed conflict and the slaying of enemies; they did the same during the Crusades, of course, and the French wars of religion, not to mention the English Revolution, which culminated in regicide. In the American colonies, as James Byrd points out in this superb book, ministers used the scriptures to justify violence at least as far back as King Philip’s War in the 17th century.

Byrd makes a persuasive case for the centrality of sermons in propagating and justifying armed rebellion. “In the biblically saturated American colonies, ministers were the agreed-upon experts on the Bible,” he writes, and “their sermons were the most serious engagements between scripture and war in America, both before and during the Revolution.”

It is hardly a new observation that different groups of believers emphasize different parts of the Bible—Catholics and mainline Protestants, for example, prefer the Gospels, whereas evangelicals gravitate to the Pauline letters—but Byrd demonstrates that 18th-century preachers were remarkably nimble in their biblical interpretations. “In battles against the Indians and the French, and in the later Revolution against the British,” he writes, “wars influenced which biblical texts colonists saw as being most important and how they applied those texts in their political and spiritual lives.”

Byrd argues that the French and Indian War (the American iteration of the Seven Years’ War) provided a rhetorical warm-up for the American Revolution. Preachers decried the Boston Massacre of March 5, 1770, as a “horrid murder” that recalled Cain’s slaying of his brother, Abel. By the time of the Stamp Act, the Quebec Act and the Intolerable Acts, the sounding boards of pulpits were reverberating with righteous indignation toward the British. In 1772, for example, John Allen, a Baptist, preached: “This is the book I have been waiting for: opening the door wide for all God’s children to be a part, grounded in theology and history, drawing on long experience of teaching and leading worship, with study of congregations in the U.S. and abroad, full of practical application, and graced by the Spirit.”

—ROBIN KNOWLES WALLACE, Professor of Worship and Music, Methodist Theological School in Ohio
Oration, Upon the Beauties of Liberty, or the Essential Rights of Americans, which went through five editions and seven printings.

Underlying Byrd’s astute analysis is a database of biblical references he compiled. One of the most popular texts during the Revolution was Exodus 15:3: “The Lord is a man of war.” Indeed, the Exodus narrative figured prominently in Revolutionary era sermons. George Washington was viewed as Moses, and colonists, goaded by the preachers, increasingly understood themselves as the beleaguered Hebrews toiling under the scourge of slavery in Egypt. The Promised Land of liberty lay at the far end of the wilderness of Revolution.

Although John Wesley, Samuel Hopkins and more than a few black preachers pointed out the irony of white slaveholders identifying themselves as bondservants, the Exodus metaphor served as a powerful motivation for armed revolution. “By making the Exodus story their own,” Byrd writes, “the patriots set the parameters for later Americans, including nineteenth-century slaves, who saw the liberation of the Hebrews from Egypt as a model for their own struggles.”

Preachers frequently invoked the pugilism of the Song of Deborah and the curse from Jeremiah against those who refused to take up arms: “Cursed be he that keepeth back his sword from blood” (Jer. 48:10). Some preachers took gruesome delight in recounting Jael’s murder of Sisera, the captain of Jabin’s army: Jael took him into her tent and then, with a hammer, drove a spike through his skull. The lesson was clear: pacifism in the face of British tyranny was no option. In Byrd’s words, “To refuse to fight this tyrannical power was to reject both a civic responsibility and a sacred duty.”

David’s battle against Goliath also figured prominently in the rhetoric, both to justify violence and to embolden a militarily overmatched populace. Even the Continental Congress invoked David’s contest to build popular support for the Revolution. As for the epistles, they could cut both ways. Paul counseled obedience to authorities, but patriot preachers defiantly deflected emphasis toward Paul’s letter to the Galatians, which, Byrd writes, “gushed with liberty—nearly unbounded liberty, liberty that was both civil and Christian.”

The surprise here—and Byrd is surprised as well—is that the book of Revelation was not invoked more frequently in Revolutionary-era sermons. The author explains this by positing that wartime ministers focused on “apocalyptic militancy, not on an American millennium.” Still, plenty of preachers found analogs for dragons, the mark of the beast, and the woman with a crown of 12 stars. In the hands of such preachers, “Revelation portrayed a military Jesus who corrected the mistaken image of a pacifist Jesus.”

Byrd concludes that for the Revolutionary generation, “the Bible was a dramatic, often graphically violent, succession of war stories featuring heroic exemplars of spiritual faith and military prowess.” But what about those who dissented, especially those associated with the peace churches, who faced persecution, vandalism and the distraint of goods for withholding their support for military action? This void in Byrd’s account is doubtless due to the nature of sources: although Quaker and Mennonite rhetoric would have provided a fuller picture of religious responses to the Revolution, these groups left a scant documentary trail because of the nature of their communities and their worship.

Byrd also seems not to have noticed that the most bellicose sermons he quotes came from Presbyterian ministers—not Congregationalists or Methodists or even Baptists. Did most

Reviewed by Randall Balmer, an Episcopal priest, chair of the religion department at Dartmouth College, and author of First Freedom: The Fight for Religious Liberty.

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Philip Jenkins - “Holy Wars, Jihads, and Christian History”
Dr. Philip Jenkins is a Distinguished Professor of History at Baylor University, where he also serves in the Institute for Studies of Religion. He has published 24 books, including The Lost History of Christianity (2008), Jesus Wars (2010) and more recently Laying Down the Sword: Why We Can’t Ignore the Bible’s Violent Verses (HarperOne, 2011).

Richard Hays - “Preaching Backwards: Israel’s Scripture through the Eyes of the Gospel Writers”
Dr. Richard B. Hays is the Dean and George Washington Ivey Professor of New Testament at Duke Divinity School. His book The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation was selected by Christianity Today as one of the 100 most important religious books of the twentieth century.

Jana Childers - “Preaching in the Age of the Spirit”
The Reverend Doctor Jana L. Childers is the Professor of Homiletics and Speech-Communication at San Francisco Theological Seminary and a Presbyterian minister. She holds an M.Div. degree from Princeton Theological Seminary and a Ph.D. from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California.

Michael Hawn - “You Are What You Sing: Shaping Faith through Congregational Singing”
Dr. Michael Hawn is a Distinguished Professor of Church Music and Director of the Sacred Music Program in Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University. Dr. Hawn is a frequent contributor to church music periodicals in the areas of church music education and hymnology, having published over 300 articles, reviews, books, and curriculum materials.

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such sermons indeed come from Presbyterians, and if so, why? (His database appears to have contained only biblical references, not the denominational provenance of the preachers or even their geographical location.) Is the apparent Presbyterian predominance because of their regional concentration in the middle colonies, or is it because of Scottish and Presbyterian antipathy toward the British dating back for generations?

These are quibbles. Among the other contributions of this fine study, Sacred Scripture, Sacred War demonstrates the convulsive and tragic nature of war, which not only makes citizens into soldiers but also transforms the Prince of Peace into a Mighty Warrior.

Silence: A Christian History
By Diarmaid MacCulloch
Viking, 272 pp., $27.95

Many years ago, the great historians of the French Annales school complained that scholars spend far too much time dealing with the elites and their wars and very little on the crucial matters of ordinary everyday life. Why, they asked, do we have no histories of death, of childhood, of old age? Today, of course, we have many such narratives. But Christian history still has a lot of room for such grand thematic questions, and Sir Diarmaid MacCulloch presents one in his history of silence. The book, which grows out of his 2012 Gifford Lectures, is a triumph. It challenges and will transform readers’ attitudes on a host of subjects that they may think they know well. Unusually for a work of scholarly history, it may also reshape readers’ spiritual and devotional lives.

The scale of MacCulloch’s ambition and the vastness of his topic are apparent from the titles of the book’s four main sections: “The Bible,” “The Triumph of Monastic Silence,” “Silence Through Three Reformations” and “Reaching Behind Noise in Christian History.” Unsurprisingly, he shows himself thoroughly accomplished in the scholarship of every era of Christian history, and his range of cultural references is deeply impressive.

MacCulloch discusses the familiar topics of meditation and contemplation, but also such controversial aspects of silence as deception, dissimulation, discretion, secrecy, denial, concealment, cover-up and oblivion. Someone who urges you to “keep quiet about this” rarely means well. In a human interaction, your silence may signify awe and rapt contemplation, or it could indicate guilt or confusion. It might reveal stupor or wonder, but it can also make you look stupid. The word dumb has a complex history.

Attitudes toward such matters have changed radically over time. In the earlier biblical eras, prayer was assumed to be at least vocal, if not noisy; dumb was a severe condemnation applied to pagan...
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