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Kidd's "God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution" - Book Review

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God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution. By Thomas S. Kidd. (New York: Basic, 2010. vi, 298 pp. \$26.95, ISBN 978-0-465-00235-1.)

There is no shortage of books on religion in the founding era, but many of them focus on the views of a few elites—usually Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and one or two others. Authors of these volumes generally acknowledge that not all founders were as “enlightened” as this select fraternity, but they leave the distinct impression that the founders were deists who were motivated by secular ideologies or some combination of self, class, and state interests.

God of Liberty demonstrates that Christianity had a profound impact on Americans throughout the founding era (not just during the American Revolution, as suggested by the title). Notably, they understood God to be the author of natural rights, especially religious liberty and human equality. Faith also played an important role in convincing them that humans are sinful, that virtue is necessary for the success of republican governments, and that God is involved in the affairs of men and nations.

These commitments encouraged significant numbers of Americans to fight British tyranny, oppose religious establishments, and create a constitutional order characterized by checks and balances and the separation of powers. They also informed early opposition to slavery, although many white Americans rejected this application of the principle of human equality.

Thomas S. Kidd acknowledges that Christians in the era disagreed among themselves and that Americans were influenced by a complex combination of religious beliefs, ideological influences, and other interests. He also emphasizes that there was significant religious diversity among white Americans in the era, but that it was primarily within the boundaries of Christianity.

One of the book’s key contributions is to highlight the role of evangelicals in the founding era. A minor oversight is that Kidd does not offer a clear definition of “evangelical” or attempt to determine how many Americans in the era may be given this appellation. It is possible to infer a definition from his many

examples: perhaps “Protestants supportive of religious revivals,” and he does distinguish between “radical” and “moderate” evangelicals. However, his description of the latter as individuals who “were delighted to see sinners experience salvation, but they worried that radicals like the Methodists were breeding religious chaos” would apply to groups such as the Old Light Calvinists who are not usually considered to be evangelical (pp. 196–97).

Unlike scholars who view the founding through the eyes of five or six elites, Kidd discusses a wide range of men and women who helped secure America’s independence from Great Britain and establish the new constitutional republic. This leads him to recognize that deists were a small but influential minority in the era and that virtually no one wanted the nation to be a secular republic. Most critically, he offers a persuasive argument that scholars who neglect the influence of faith in the American founding miss an important part of the story.

God of Liberty is well researched, well organized, and extremely well written. It is one of those rare books that can be profitably read by specialists of the era and the general public.

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