

America(s) in the Bible

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Perry's fascinating analysis of the *Bicentennial Bible* (1975) and the *American Patriot's Bible* (2009) emphasizes just how closely these texts are tied to right-wing politics. The marginal notes feature quotations from Dick Cheney and other conservative activists on the subjects of liberty and the efficacy of public school prayer and free-markets. The *Bicentennial Bible* declares that Scripture is "America's Book from Almighty God." These biblical editors, though literalists and inerrantists, see America all through a sacred text that conspicuously lacks any mention of America. And yet the editors wring their hands over a growing unwillingness by Americans to link the purposes of God to the nation. If anything, observes Perry, the sense of embattlement has gotten more intense since the 1970s. The *Patriot's Bible* issued a "call to arms" to reverse the nation's rapid drift from biblical foundations.

Given the intensity of these Christian nationalist voices, it can be easy to equate them with broader American evangelicalism. But in fact, as Perry shows, there is a real range of evangelical opinion and special-interest Bibles, some that far precede contemporary right-wing versions. The *Patriot's Bible*, rooted in an eschatological perspective known as premillennialism, represents a very particular reading of Scripture and American history that emphasizes declension from earlier ideals. But the [Woman's Bible](#) (1895-98) of a century earlier was certainly not a conservative text. Supporting suffrage, it represented a postmillennial view that history is ever progressing toward equality. In the brief remarks that follow, I want to extend Perry's observation by discussing some contemporary evangelical interpretations of the Bible and America that look very different from the kind of Christian nationalism represented by the *Patriot's Bible*.

Perhaps most vehement in recent years have been neo-Anabaptists, who enjoy growing influence among evangelicals. Each July 4 a battalion of prominent bloggers that includes Kurt Willems, Benjamin Corey, Greg Boyd, and writers affiliated with the MennoNerds network issues posts such as ["A Liturgy of Confession and Allegiance for July 4th"](#) that push back against American jingoism. This evangelical Anabaptist phenomenon began back in the 1970s. The numbers were far lower then, but the intensity was not. The *Post-American* tabloid (now known as *Sojourners*) featured a signature blend of evangelical piety, leftist politics, and anti-nationalism. The first issue, which came out in the fall of 1971, featured [a cover of Jesus wearing a crown of thorns and cuffed with an American flag](#) that covered his bruised body. America, the depiction implied, had re-crucified Christ. Inside, "A Joint Treaty of Peace between the People of the United States, South Vietnam and North Vietnam" declared that the American and Vietnamese people were not enemies and called for the immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops. The "American captivity of the church," founder Jim Wallis continued, "has resulted in the disastrous equation of the American way of life with the Christian way of life."

Piling on have been evangelical historians represented at hundreds of state universities and Christian liberal arts colleges. In the 1970s and 1980s they were led by a [scholarly triumvirate](#) made up of Robert Linder (Kansas State), Richard Pierard (Indiana State), and Robert Clouse (Indiana State). In the 1980s Mark Noll and George Marsden conducted a sometimes-combative dispute with Francis Schaeffer over the notion of Christian America. And more recently, Warren Throckmorton of Grove City College and John Fea of Messiah College [have taken on David Barton](#) and enlisted dozens of colleagues in opposition to his flood of books, speeches, and videos. Largely due to their activism, publisher Thomas Nelson in 2012 [pulled Barton's book](#) *The Jefferson Lies*. To be sure, there are millions of fundamentalists and evangelicals on the ground who still espouse a blind patriotic narrative, but a formidable evangelical brain trust stands united in support of the kind of nuance and context practiced by the broader historical guild.

Another woefully understudied, but potentially significant, source of dissent is global evangelicalism. To my knowledge Mark Noll is one of the few to analyze foreign perspectives on America's treatment of Scripture. In one of the most striking chapters of *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, entitled "Opinions of Protestants Abroad," Noll surveys how nineteenth-century European Christians regarded the American debate over slavery. None linked the defense of American slavery with the defense of scriptural authority. Many Europeans, according to Tracy McKenzie's overview, observed what was "invisible to American believers, in particular the degree to which material interests, republican assumptions, and racial attitudes were shaping the Christians, North and South." Many were withering in their assessments of American methodologies in debates over the Civil War. Noll agrees, noting the utter lack of "theological profundity." American Christians were hyper-individualistic, lacked any central authority, and paid insufficient attention to tradition.

Is there a twenty-first-century equivalent of this critique? Views from abroad are surely diverse themselves, but it is difficult to imagine a strong global constituency for *The Patriot's Bible*. This is perhaps Perry's perceptive point when he writes, "It may be that evangelicals' goal of Americanizing the Bible is at cross-purposes with their goal of biblicizing America, because they make the Bible dependent on a particular reading of American history." Of the individuals quoted in *The Patriot's Bible*, the overwhelming majority are white, male, dead, and American. The appeal of this message and approach surely has real limits in the context of a rising Global South, a maturing theological educational system abroad, and burgeoning immigration to the U.S. from the Majority World.

Barton surely derives identity, strength, and internal cohesion from his sense of embattlement. But the weight of demography leans heavily against the kind of right-wing Christian nationalism represented by these patriotic bibles. It could be that *The Patriot's Bible*—with its misplaced nostalgia and abuse of history—is a last gasp from marginal fundamentalists slipping into obscurity. After all, conservatives are losing the battle over same-sex marriage. Some are abandoning the faith entirely.

Others, supplementing common-sense readings of Scripture with history and tradition, are “jumping the Tiber” (see Christian Smith’s [The Bible Made Impossible](#)) or taking the Canterbury Trail (see Robert Webber’s [Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail](#)).

In the end, the rowdy assemblage of immigrant, Anabaptist, and Christian nationalist perspectives may simply be the logical end of an individualistic Protestantism. American evangelicals, [as Tocqueville noted](#), were the authors of a democratic, non-hierarchical style that was simultaneously volatile and virile. Very few purveyors of usable history in this debate over Scripture and the nation have practiced the humility of Lincoln, who turned out to be one of the very few profound theological voices during the Civil War. Acknowledging that “the Almighty has his own purposes” is not the kind of sensibility that would tend to cuff Jesus with an American flag—or interpolate quotes from Dick Cheney into the biblical text.