A Nation Apart, Together

Holy Nation

The Transatlantic Quaker Ministry in an Age of Revolution

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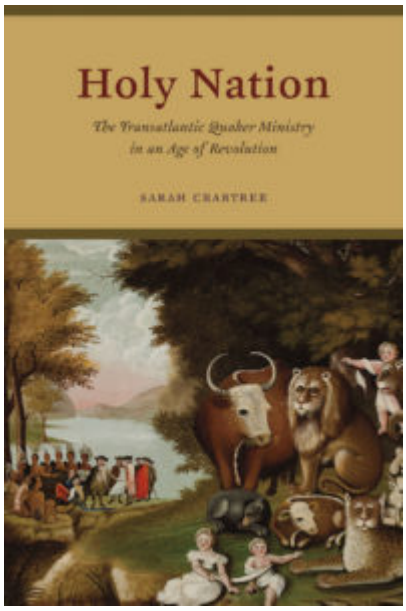
In the 1942 essay “Pacifism and War,” George Orwell wrote, “Pacifism is objectively pro-Fascist . . . . If you hamper the war effort of one side, you automatically help that of the other.” In his address to Congress in 2001, George W. Bush declared, “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.” And now, more recently, in our own presidential election, many suggested the illegitimacy of the “protest vote.” At critical junctures in American history, people who occupy the middle ground on controversial issues have been pressured to choose a side. Such an insistence has often edged out and persecuted those who refuse. And few have been so intent in their efforts to maintain their neutrality than the Society of Friends, as Sarah Crabtree explains in *Holy Nation*.



Sarah Crabtree, *Holy Nation: The Transatlantic Quaker Ministry in an Age of Revolution*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. 304 pp., $45.

Because of their insistence on pacifism, Quakers historically have been treated as suspicious, at best, or traitors, at worst. Most scholars have argued that Quakers responded to pressures to conform by retreating from politics altogether, but Crabtree convincingly contends that “[p]ublic Friends in particular remained extremely active” during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (215). Because Quakers could be neither with the nation nor against it without violating their principles, they framed themselves as citizens of a “holy nation,” united by faith, dedicated to the mission of establishing a “church militant upon earth” (2, 92).

In “Part 1: Combat 1754-1789,” Crabtree tracks the beginning of this imperative to the Seven Years’ War. During this period, public Friends called for the creation of “a new Zion”—a spiritual homeland—so that they might “maintain . . . cohesion . . . amidst the chaos of the world around them” (32). The biblical notion of Zion appealed to the Quakers because they, like the Jews, were forced to endure exile and oppression. And they, like the Jews, took solace in

spiritual unity with fellow believers in the face of diaspora.

As the Zionist narrative allowed Quakers to maintain their principles during the Seven Years' War, so it did during the American Revolution. Crabtree points to the Virginia exile crisis as a particularly trying time for Quakers, whom a falsified missive had implicated as spies. Friends throughout the colonies suffered for these accusations as Congress targeted them for requisitions and quartering to "ensure that they contributed one way or another" (45). But Crabtree contends that, since Quakers saw suffering as part of their faith, they maintained cohesion. *Holy Nation* is one of the very few (if not the only) book-length sources written in the twentieth or twenty-first centuries that addresses this crisis, which marked a crucial turning point in the war—not just for Quakers, but for anyone who voiced dissent—and Crabtree provides a fresh and insightful reading of this event.

Just what constituted "political engagement" could have used some clarification in Part 1. Although the Quaker Margaret Morris framed herself as a "mother in Israel" in her Revolutionary War journal, she also hid a loyalist informant in her house. And while Elizabeth Drinker—a key figure in the Virginia Exile Crisis—described herself as a member of the holy nation that Crabtree describes, she (and other Friends) negotiated with George Washington to set the exiles free. They were neither removed from nor above worldly politics, as Crabtree claims the Quakers were. In short, the line distinguishing the "holy nation" from the outside world was a bit murkier during the Revolution than is represented here.

"Part 2: Compromise, 1779-1809," discusses how the Friends created walled garden schools to resist the "nationalist education project" (105). Quakers who attended public schools were taunted and harassed as "Tories," and government-mandated curriculum insisted the children learn "principles of liberty and government" (103, 122). In an effort to protect the holy nation in the midst of these pressures to homogenize, Quakers created their own educational system that taught children to follow God's law over national law. The theory that someone could "wall in" that which he wanted to protect and "wall out" that which he wanted to eschew did not hold. (Donald Trump, take note.)

In "Part 3: Concession, 1793-1826," Crabtree explains that war-weary Quakers who could not endure another fifty years of persecution sought reconciliation through cosmopolitanism. Quakers stopped thinking of themselves as "wholly outside of the nation" and began forming coalitions with activist societies whose goals aligned with theirs (134, 145). Unfortunately, however, both America and France still viewed the Friends as inimical to their nationalist projects, and the Quakers' "still small voice was drowned out by the nationalist cheers" (196). The Hicksite-Orthodox separation of 1827—which split the Society of Friends and rocked the core of Quaker ideology—sounded the death-knell for the Friends' new Zion. Although they had lived for so long as "a nation apart, together," they now had to "cast their lot with the worldly nations in which they lived" (2, 213).

Holy Nation is well written, well organized, and thoroughly researched. But more than that—it is also hopeful and, paradoxically, disconcerting. This book reminds us, after a very contentious election, that dissenters threaten polarized parties who wished to simplify complex political issues for their own gain. This dissent is essential, but always imperiled. The construction of the holy nation suggests that people will always find a way to voice that dissent, but its dissolution underscores how great the pressures were and continue to be to conform.

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