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# Review: 'Gods of War, Gods of Peace: How the Meeting of Native and Colonial Religions Shaped Early America'

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Book review:

Russell Bourne. *Gods of War, Gods of Peace: How the Meeting of Native and Colonial Religions Shaped Early America*. New York, NY: Harcourt, 2002.

In this ambitious and interesting book, Russell Bourne, former editor at *American Heritage* and author of *The Red King's Rebellion: Racial Politics in New England*, argues that “the cultural contact between Anglo-Americans and Native Americans ... becomes most understandable when seen as an intrinsically religious encounter” (p. 3) that had “immense consequences for [both] cultures” (p. xii). Bourne covers the two centuries from the 1630s through the 1830s, shedding light on familiar and less familiar religious figures such as Handsome Lake, Hobomock, John Eliot, Jonathan Edwards, Samuel Kirkland, and Shikellamy. Bourne’s sympathies are clearly with moments and places, including the Nanticoke Reformer’s Juniata Junction and David Brainerd’s Crossweeksung, where Indians and Europeans joined to create “equitable biracial communities” (p. 224). Most of the time, however, the “gods of war” overwhelmed the “gods of peace.” Bourne is quite persuasive in describing 17th-century conflicts such as the Pequot War and King Philip’s War as religious wars. More provocatively, he argues that the American Revolution, in which George Washington’s “largest assault ... [was] against the corn-rich, spirited, unreconcilable Iroquois,” was in many ways a conflict of “Indian nationalism and American evangelical imperialism” (276-77).

*Gods of War* is filled with similarly bold assertions. Unfortunately, there are no footnotes or related devices, making it more difficult for the reader to assess the author’s claims. Yes, there is a bibliography, but there is no substantive preface or historiographical essay that would enlighten the reader as to where Bourne fits into the general academic conversation. All this is to say that the traditional scholarly apparatus has its virtues.

Readers of *Ohio History* will be especially interested in the final third of *Gods of War*, where Bourne deals with European-Indian interactions in Ohio, including the slaughter of Indians at the Moravian village of Gnadenhuetten, and the defeat at Fallen Timbers of Blue Jacket and the Ohio Indians (whose ability to fight may have been diminished by excessive pre-battle fasting). Then there is Tecumseh, his brother Tenskatawa (“the Prophet”), and the doomed Shawnee resistance; in one of many fascinating asides Bourne discusses how a group of Shakers from Kentucky were impressed by and learned much from Tenskatawa: “‘Surely God is in this place!’ they said of the Shawnee Prophet’s town” (p. 327).

But this is the weakest section of the book, as Bourne is less sure-footed in dealing with post-Revolutionary America. While he makes great use of the Second Great Awakening, arguing that it was a crucial factor in the removal of Indians “from the land that gave them their cultural identity” (p. 332), there is no clear definition of the Awakening and no clear sense as to who constituted the “awakened.” While Bourne holds up Mormons as exceptionally sympathetic to the Indians, it really is impossible to explain the Mormons and their relationship with native Americans in four paragraphs. Most egregious, the notion that after 1830, when Protestant leaders failed in their effort to halt passage of the Indian Removal Act, religion in the United

States became a strictly “private matter” (except for a vague civil religion) is completely off-base (p. 365).

*Gods of War, Gods of Peace* is a book that makes grand statements about the first two hundred years of American history, and the formation of American identity. As such, it contains too many overstatements and oversimplifications. This said, it is bracing to encounter a book of such ambition and, often, insight. Russell Bourne’s book is certainly worth reading, both to get a sense of how taking religion seriously will alter one’s perspective on American history, and to recall the “gods of peace” who, if heeded, would have made this a better country in which to live.

— *William Vance Trollinger Jr., University of Dayton*