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Homesteader - July 1, 2014

PASTOR'S PEN -

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While the shelves at any bookstore routinely display histories of the American Revolution, an element of the American founding era is often omitted by historians-the role of religion. The revolution, they imply, was essentially secular in nature. Not so! And no one recognized this better than the foes of the American revolutionaries.

General Serle of the British army asserted that the revolution could not be sustained if it were not for the Congregationalist and Presbyterian ministers who bred it. Kevin Phillips, in his 1998 study of the American Revolution, twice noted: "King George III and other Britons called the colonists' rebellion a 'Presbyterian War.'" According to British historian, George Trevelyan, loyalists alleged that "political agitation against the Royal Government had been deliberately planned by Presbyterians... it was fostered and abetted by Presbyterians in every colony."

Yet many historians no longer give much attention to this religious interpretation of the revolution. Nevertheless, a Hessian mercenary fighting for the British told a friend in 1778: "this war is not an American Revolution, it is nothing more nor less than an Irish-Scotch Presbyterian Rebellion."

From the beginning of the conflict, George III was convinced that the leading New England rebels were Presbyterians. This came in a remark he made to Massachusetts governor Thomas Hutchinson in 1774. When discussing the nature

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Rev. Greg Smith, volunteer with Presbyterian Disaster Assistance National Response Team and Rev. Ray McCalla, pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Wayne (in front of debris in Pilger)



Volunteers in Pilger, NE

of the American dissident leadership, the king exclaimed, "are they not Presbyterians?" The king maintained this sentiment throughout the war. In 1779 Benjamin Franklin, a rather reliable source of diplomatic intelligence, stated that George III hated the American Revolutionaries because the king perceived that they were "whigs and Presbyterians." But what underpins these perceptions by the foes of the Revolution?

Without John Calvin, the French Reformer who is mostly associated with his work in the churches of Geneva in the 1500s, there might have never been an American Revolution. The political philosopher whose understanding of social contracts and the inherent rights of people helped spawn the American Revolution was Jean-Jacques Rousseau, born in 1712 in Geneva. There is a direct line of logic between Calvin's theology and Rousseau's philosophy. The Declaration of Independence speaks of the institution of government as "the just consent of the governed" (Rousseau's social contract) and "endow[ment] of inalienable rights" - also a borrowing from the Swiss Reformed Rousseau. Ironically, Rousseau died on July 2, 1778, during the American Revolution.

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-Maya Angelou



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