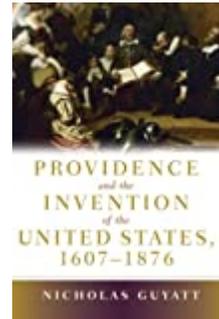


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Nicholas Guyatt.** *Providence and the Invention of the United States, 1607-1876.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 341 pp. \$24.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-68730-0.



**Reviewed by** Richard Gribble (Department of History, Stonehill College)

**Published on** H-Catholic (June, 2008)

*Providence and the Invention of the United States, 1607-1876* by Nicholas Guyatt, assistant professor at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, British Columbia, presents an exhaustively researched, well-argued, and articulate account of historical providentialism in United States. This captivating volume, which demonstrates the best in recent scholarship in the field, tells a fascinating story from a new and enlightened perspective. Unquestionably this monograph deserves high praise for its contribution to scholarship and its important and thought-provoking message.

Guyatt revives the story of American providentialism by answering two important questions: How did Americans come to think God had a special plan for their nation, and what did America do with this conviction from the founding of Jamestown in 1607 to the end of Reconstruction after the Civil War? The author takes issue with earlier scholars who have viewed the providential story as a consistent and largely unchanging force in American history. In contrast, he argues that not only did providentialism play a leading role in the invention of American national identity prior to 1865, but this concept was neither static nor timeless. He also challenges the long-held idea that providentialism was an American invention, suggesting it originated in England. Lastly, Guyatt argues that providentialism was not only a component of

American identity, but also a strategy for achieving concrete political goals. After reading this fine volume, one can easily conclude that the author has achieved his goals in an admirable manner.

Part 1 of this monograph describes how providential thinking came to America. Guyatt first explains the roots of national providentialism, stating that British national providentialism was evident in the formation of Jamestown. Secondly, he shows that the rationale for the Massachusetts Bay Colony had strong ties to British national providentialism. Fears that the motherland was “flirting” too much with Catholicism gave added emphasis to the providential drive. During the period of the Restoration in England (1660-1700) providentialism in the colonies and England diverged. The English saw God’s hand less present; New England, in contrast, saw God even more present. The uncertainty of God’s purpose in England only grew greater after the end of the Seven Years War (1756-1763) and the rise of political tensions in the colonies. The separation was complete by 1783 after the colonists’ victory in the revolution. Patriotic propagandists heralded the continual dimensions of America’s potential, serving as a precursor to the cry of “Manifest Destiny” in the mid-nineteenth century.

Part 2 of this book illustrates how confidence in God’s plan for the United States was undermined during the

early years of the republic. Initially after the Revolutionary War, Americans claimed God's providence through the Constitution and the Louisiana Purchase. Guyatt then explains how the providential swell began to break down. First was the question of what to do with the Indians who were displaced by the westward movement of white Americans. Fears arose that God would punish America if the new nation continued to abuse its non-white population. Opinions varied concerning who the Indians were (for example, some believed them to be the descendants of Jews scattered after the Roman Diaspora of 70 CE) and whether some method of colonization for these people should be attempted. Similarly, questions arose concerning America's black population, both those free in the North and slaves in the South. The major drive to resettle blacks came through the efforts of the American Colonization Society (ACS), founded in 1818 by Robert Finley. People on both sides of the Indian and black issues tried to show God's providential hand. There was no common view with respect to either group.

The idea of God's providential hand in America continued to unravel throughout the nineteenth century. For example, God's purpose in the Civil War was debated on both fronts. Abraham Lincoln saw God's hand punishing the nation for its promotion of slavery. Southerners, however, saw their secession and formation of a new nation as an indication that the slave system had received God's favor. Even after the publication of the Emancipation Proclamation and the Union victory, some claimed it was God's will for slavery to end because its usefulness to blacks had ended.

Professor Guyatt's research and scholarship demon-

strate not only exhaustive work, but complete knowledge of sources, both primary and secondary. The author uses sermons, tracts, essays, and other written sources of the day as his primary-source base. However, the volume contains no complete bibliography of sources, which would have been very helpful, especially for researchers. The book is extremely well contextualized; the reader understands the providentialism story within the larger framework of American history. The monograph is geared toward a scholarly audience, but it is well organized and clearly argued and thus can be effectively used for upper division college-level courses as well.

Nicholas Guyatt's first foray into the scholarly work of American religion is a major success, as the author adroitly and completely answers the two basic questions that opened the book. He clearly demonstrates that providentialism arose in England and came to this land in the early settlements, especially Jamestown and Massachusetts Bay Colony. He also effectively shows how national providentialism was characterized by ebb and flow; there was no consistent understanding of this idea and how it might be manifest in the events of American history.

Guyatt's monograph makes a significant contribution to the fields of American religious and secular history. This volume straddles both fields, making a connection through the perception of God's provident hand in the events of everyday life, both for the common individual and the nation as a whole. The monograph is a must-read for those who study American religion and the general reader with some background in American life, both secular and sacred.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-catholic>

**Citation:** Richard Gribble. Review of Guyatt, Nicholas, *Providence and the Invention of the United States, 1607-1876*. H-Catholic, H-Net Reviews. June, 2008.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14559>

Copyright © 2008 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).