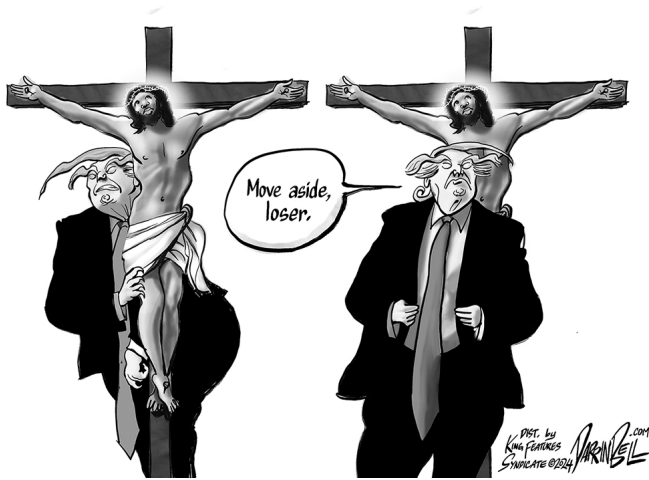


The Bible is America's book

Written by By Rich Lowry
Friday, 26 April 2024 03:52



Of all the objectionable things Donald Trump has ever done, selling a Bible would seem to rank pretty far down the list.

Yet his marketing, along with Lee Greenwood, of a God Bless the U.S.A. Bible for \$59.99 has occasioned a couple of news cycles of outrage. The Bible has an American flag cover and accompanying American historical documents, including the Declaration of Independence, as well as the words to Greenwood's iconic patriotic song.

Hawking the Bible like it's a digital trading card or a personalized sneaker — to name a couple of other products Trump has pushed in his inimitable style — is tasteless and unpresidential, needless to say.

Dwight Eisenhower didn't market golf balls, and it was notoriously Jimmy Carter's brother — not the president — who sold a specially branded beer.

Nor should anyone confuse the handiwork of Thomas Jefferson — or Lee Greenwood — with the Word of God. But the incensed commentary makes it sound as though Trump is the first person to sell an edition of a Bible catering to a niche market. In reality, there's a dizzying array of Bibles in this country for people with different interests, whether it's the law enforcement Bible, busy mom's Bible or outdoorsman's Bible with a camouflage cover and "devotions that tie

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directly to the sports of hunting, fishing, backpacking or any outdoor activity.”

The God Bless the U.S.A. Bible was first published in 2021 and already had competition in the American Patriot's Bible from 2009.

The fact is that selling Bibles is a very American venture, and the Bible, particularly the King James Version endorsed by Trump, is a very American book, in fact, the American book.

The ship's carpenter on the Mayflower might have brought the first copy of the King James Bible to our shores. The historian of Christianity Mark Noll notes that the Bible was often the only book that families owned.

By around 1800, traveling Bible salesman Parson Weems (famous for his biography of George Washington) was marveling at the hot market: “I tell you, this is the very season and age of the Bible. Bible dictionaries, Bible tales, Bible stories — Bibles plain or paraphrased, Carey's Bibles, Collins' Bibles, Clarke's Bibles, Kimptor's Bibles, no matter what or whose, all, all will go down, so wide is the crater of public appetite at this time.”

According to Noll, between 1794 and 1815, 186 novels were published in America compared to 246 editions of the New Testament or the full Bible. Almost all of the Bibles published before 1840 were the King James Version. Already early in the 19th century, he writes, “printer-publishers were creating and meeting demand by packaging the King James Version in many sizes, shapes.”

Constant innovations in printing and distribution meant that the Bible and Bible-related literature led to what another historian calls “the birth of mass media in America.”

The King James Version played an enormous role in shaping America's anti-monarchical attitudes during the Revolution. And the way the Bible pervaded and shaped American life was one reason that the country's early leaders hoped a state establishment of religion was unnecessary — thanks to the Bible, they could have Christianity, and a virtuous society, without Christendom.

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The King James Bible became foundational to American rhetoric and literature such that it is impossible to imagine the work of the likes of Martin Luther King Jr. or William Faulkner without it. Even as its influence has declined, we often quote or echo it without even realizing it.

“The great influence of the King James Version in American history,” Noll has said, “came precisely because it was so widely available; because precisely its words, and what the words communicated, had entered so deeply into the consciousness of so many Americans, and particularly of otherwise voiceless Americans.”

The God Bless the U.S.A. Bible won't be a signal contribution to this tradition, but neither is it a betrayal of it.

Rich Lowry is editor of the National Review.

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