



4.3 THE GREAT AWAKENING

<p>REASONS FOR THE GREAT AWAKENING</p>	<p>The most significant religious development in colonial America was the REVIVAL MOVEMENT known as the Great Awakening. This wave of RELIGIOUS ENTHUSIASM swept through the colonies during the mid-1700s, bringing EMOTIONAL CONVERSIONS and satisfying a SEARCH FOR MEANING AND CERTAINTY. It was America’s version of a more general reaction against the formal orthodoxy of state churches in Europe. In Germany, it was known as Pietism and in England and Scotland as Methodism. In all these Protestant cultures, new forms of religious expression developed as a REACTION AGAINST THE ENLIGHTENMENT. The movement reaffirmed the view, in the words of one historian, that “being truly religious meant trusting the HEART rather than the head, prizing FEELING more than thinking, and relying on BIBLICAL REVELATION rather than human reason.”</p>
<p><u>Reaction to the Enlightenment:</u> Heart vs. Head Feeling vs. Thinking Revelation vs. Reason</p>	<p>Why were the colonists ripe for such emotional religious conversions? According to historian Christine Leigh Heyrman, it was an era of extraordinary UPHEAVAL AND CRISIS for ordinary people. England was entering the INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION and evangelicals like the Methodists attracted large numbers of converts among miners and factory workers. Northern Ireland and Germany, other hotbeds of evangelical enthusiasm, were wracked by WARFARE, FAMINE, or both. These harsh conditions prompted hundreds of thousands of MIGRATIONS to British North America.</p>
<p><u>European Upheaval & Crisis:</u> Industrial Rev, Warfare, Famine, Migrations</p>	<p>In American, there was a massive internal SHIFT IN POPULATION to the frontiers of the South and West, where ordinary families endured barren, ROOTLESS lives and the ever-present THREAT OF ATTACK from dispossessed Indian tribes. Such circumstances also thrust women into NEWLY RESPONSIBLE ROLES for the survival of migrating households as families were fragmented by movement and death.</p>
<p><u>American Shift in Population to Frontier:</u> Rootlessness, Indian Attack, New Roles</p>	<p>It follows that men and women faced with such stark challenges might have sought opportunities for FELLOWSHIP, SOLACE, AND EMOTIONAL RELEASE--and that is exactly what evangelicals on both sides of the Atlantic offered. Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists touted their churches as havens from all the evils afflicting ordinary people--as islands of disciplined stability and Christian charity in a churning sea of social chaos and cultural confusion.</p>
<p><u>Tools to Meet Challenges:</u> Fellowship, Solace, Emotional Release</p>	<p>The earliest manifestations of the Great Awakening in America appeared among the Presbyterians in PENNSYLVANIA AND NEW JERSEY. Led by Scots-Irish immigrant Rev. WILLIAM TENNENT and his four sons, the Presbyterians held religious revivals and established a seminary (later called PRINCETON) to train clergymen to preach with evangelical fervor to bring about religious conversions.</p>
<p><u>Evangelical Preachers:</u> William Tennent</p>	<p>The religious enthusiasm spread from the Presbyterians in the middle colonies to the Congregationalists (Puritans) and Baptists of NEW ENGLAND. By the 1740s, the clergymen in these churches were conducting revivals throughout the region. Preachers like JONATHAN EDWARDS called forth vivid, terrifying images of the corruption of human nature and the terrors of hell. Edward’s famous sermon Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God described the sinner as a loathsome spider suspended by a slender thread over a pit of raging fire:</p>
<p>Jonathan Edwards</p>	<p><i>The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes, than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince; and yet it is nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment. It is to be ascribed to nothing else, that you did not go</i></p>

<p>George Whitefield</p> <p>DEBATES OVER: Manifestations of the Spirit</p>	<p><i>to hell the last night; that you was suffered to awake again in this world, after you closed your eyes to sleep. And there is no other reason to be given, why you have not dropped into hell since you arose in the morning, but that God's hand has held you up. There is no other reason to be given why you have not gone to hell, since you have sat here in the house of God, provoking his pure eyes by your sinful wicked manner of attending his solemn worship. Yea, there is nothing else that is to be given as a reason why you do not this very moment drop down into hell.</i></p> <p><i>O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in: it is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of that God, whose wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you, as against many of the damned in hell. You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder; and you have no interest in any Mediator, and nothing to lay hold of to save yourself, nothing to keep off the flames of wrath, nothing of your own, nothing that you ever have done, nothing that you can do, to induce God to spare you one moment...</i></p> <p>In the 1740s and 1750s, the religious enthusiasm spread to the SOUTHERN COLONIES. By the eve of the American Revolution, ten percent of southern churchgoers were evangelical converts.</p> <p>After 1739, English preacher GEORGE WHITEFIELD, a founder of the Methodist Church, made several trips to America, preached throughout the colonies, and drew such large audiences that the revival meetings had to be held outdoors. A sermon in Boston attracted as many as 30,000 people. He and others preached the TRADITIONAL CALVINIST MESSAGE: Sinners are totally dependent upon an all-powerful God for their salvation. It was their method of presentation that captured their audiences. One historian observes: “Gesturing dramatically, sometimes weeping openly or thundering out threats of hellfire-and-brimstone, they turned the sermon into a gripping THEATRICAL PERFORMANCE.</p> <p>On one occasion, preaching from the balcony of the courthouse in Philadelphia, Whitefield cried out:</p> <p><i>Father Abraham, whom have you in heaven? Any Episcopalians? No. Any Presbyterians? No. Have you any Independents or Seceders? No. Have you any Methodists? No, No, No! Whom have you there? We don't know those names here. All who are here are Christians – believers in Christ, men who were overcome by the blood of the Lamb and the word of his testimony. Oh, is this the case? Then God help us, god help us all, to forget party names, and to become Christians in deed and in truth.</i></p> <p>Whitefield and others stressed that the only way to be saved was by an “EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE.” Some church services took the form of “WAILING, SHOUTING, ROLLING ON THE GROUND, PRAYING, SINGING, AND LEAPING FOR JOY.” Other religious manifestations included SPEAKING IN TONGUES, BARKING, AND SHAKING.</p> <p>Jonathan Edwards wrote of these manifestations in A Narrative of Surprising Conversations and the Great Awakening:</p> <p><i>It was very wonderful to see how person's affections were sometimes moved.... they have been ready to break forth into laughter, tears often at the same time issuing like a flood, and intermingling a loud weeping. Sometimes they have not been able to forbear crying out with a loud voice, expressing their great admiration....Some have been so overcome with a sense of the dying love of Christ to such poor, wretched, and unworthy creatures, as to weaken the body....It was a very frequent thing to see a house full of outcries, faintings, convulsions and such like, both with distress, and also with admiration and joy.</i></p>
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	<p>Edwards was involved in a debate over whether or not the Great Awakening was the work of God. He challenged his opponents to go to the scenes of revival and see for themselves. Charles Chauncy, one of his fiercest opponents, took up the challenge. In his Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion (1743), he wrote:</p> <p><i>The meeting was carried on with what appeared to me great confusion; some screaming out in distress and anguish; some praying; others singing; some again jumping up and down the house, while others were exhorting; some lying along on the floor, and others walking and talking; the whole with a very great noise, to be heard at a mile's distance, and continued almost the whole night.</i></p> <p>Chauncy felt that this was proof that the Great Awakening was not of God. But Edwards argued that the test was in the fruit. Does Godly character result from a given work? Then it is the work of God.</p>
<p>Approaches to Religion</p>	<p>Throughout the colonies, conservative and moderate clergymen QUESTIONED THE EMOTIONALISM of evangelicals, TOOK EXCEPTION TO ITINERANT PREACHERS who traveled from one community to another, preaching and often criticizing the local clergy, and were outraged when WHITE WOMEN AND AFRICAN AMERICANS SHED THEIR SUBORDINATE SOCIAL STATUS to address religious gatherings.</p> <p>Evangelical preachers and converts countered by labeling their opponents as COLD, UNINSPIRING, AND LACKING IN PIETY. There were battles within congregations and denominations over this CHALLENGE TO CLERICAL AUTHORITY and the evangelical APPROACH TO CONVERSION from the heart rather than the head.</p>
<p>RESULTS OF THE GREAT AWAKENING</p> <p>Rise in Church Membership</p>	<p>As a result of the Great Awakening, there was a dramatic INCREASE IN CHURCH MEMBERSHIP – an estimated 20,000 to 50,000 members were added to the various Protestant faiths. However, colonists were sharply POLARIZED ALONG RELIGIOUS LINES. Anglicans and Quakers gained new members from among those who disapproved of the revival's excesses while the Baptists and Methodists, who believed in democracy and emotional religion, gained members from the ranks of radical evangelical converts.</p>
<p>Religious Polarization</p>	<p>Although the largest number of churchgoing Americans remained within the Congregational and Presbyterian denominations, these churches divided into advocates (NEW LIGHTS) and opponents (OLD LIGHTS) of the evangelical approach to religion.</p>
<p>Separation of Church & State</p>	<p>In colonies where one denomination received state support, other churches lobbied legislatures for DISESTABLISHMENT, which ended the favored status of Congregationalism in Connecticut and Massachusetts and Anglicanism in the southern colonies. This defiance of authorized institutions helped prepare men's minds for the next great act of resistance: the American Revolution.</p>
<p>DISCUSSION QUESTIONS</p>	<p>What could account for the tremendous appeal of evangelical Christianity to men and women living on both sides of the Atlantic during the latter half of the 18th century?</p> <p>Religious culture in America today bears many resemblances to that of the 18th century. Since the 1960s, membership in conservative evangelical Protestant churches has grown dramatically while the membership of national organizations like the Promise Keepers and local bible study groups have also expanded at an astonishing rate. How do you account for these trends?</p>