

America's First Great Awakening

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America's First Great Awakening (1730s-1750s) was a time of reevaluation and transition. It was a time when traditional standards of the sacred and profane in the American religious community were challenged by young leaders who in fact claimed to be the champions of the true faith. The Great Awakening was seen by many to be a miraculous moving of God's providence: a sign that America was truly exceptional. Describing the Great Awakening, Robert L. Bushman contends: "A psychological earthquake had reshaped the human landscape."¹ If it was an earthquake, it not only shook the religious lives of Americans, but also its aftershocks- at times more mighty than the initial shaking- rippled through every colony, challenging the social and political foundations of each. This made the Great Awakening more than a revitalization of religion: it was the first true pan-colonial experience. It was a catalyst for the American individualism that continues to dominate American political, religious, and social life in the twenty-first century.

By the 1730s the American church had faced multiple challenges- from within its ranks as well as without. Economic pressures brought on by the Navigation Acts had dominated the second half of the seventeenth century and required religious colonists to rethink both theological and political ideologies. While Puritans enjoyed the prosperity of the time, they had to either admit that they were falling short of the Christian ideal set forth by John Winthrop and other puritan leaders or redefine what it meant to be a good Christian. They chose redefinition. No longer would prosperity be a sign of worldliness in Puritan dominated New England. From this point on, prosperity became a sign of God's blessing. In order to function within the new economy, traditional walls of religious separation also required redefinition.

¹ Richard L. Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and Social Order in Connecticut, 1690-1765* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967) 187.

Members of Christian sects, who had often viewed others as profane become mutual conduits of economic success.

The pluralism, brought on by this prosperity, caused traditional lines to blur that once had banned many people from church membership and had kept some congregations and sects apart. This led to what some historians view as a time of declension within the Church. To battle the declension, groups like the New England Puritans tried to redefine church membership and to a smaller extent redefine what it meant to be Christian in order to preserve membership rolls within their churches. The new Halfway Covenant opened a door to church membership for those who would have previously been considered profane. Peter W. Williams views the Halfway Covenant as the “triumph of family loyalty over religious principle.”² Such family loyalty was a definite sign that individualism was slowly finding its way into the church. Sydney E. Ahlstrom notes that the Halfway Covenant was not universally accepted in New England, leading some churches to split. Church splits and the willingness to question established congregational authority are indicative of the new individualism that was growing in American Christianity. The American church was maturing beyond the need of communal acceptance. Though rejected by the leaders of the Great Awakening, the Halfway Covenant contributed to the church dynamics that led to the growth of individualism in American religion.

A new movement within the Christian Church was on the horizon. Young church leaders were at the forefront of the push for an experience based relationship with God. Men like Gilbert Tennent whose sermon “The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry” challenged the very salvation of older church leaders, who argued against an experienced-based conversion. Jonathon Edwards also rose to the fore, a one who Sydney E. Ahlstrom declares was an “apologist for strict Reformed doctrine and “New Light” experientialism in a world that was making enlightened reasonableness the criterion for faith”³ attempted to turn the church back to what they viewed to be a scriptural based salvation. Though both men were Calvinists, their Calvinism took on a distinct American tone: Tennent and Edwards believed that an

² Peter W. Williams, *America's Religions* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008) 118.

³ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979)312.

external experience was central to salvation. For Tennent and Edwards, communal based salvation and the morphology of conversion fell short of God's plan for the individual believer.

Tennent and Edwards began to preach emotional sermons based upon Luther's idea of justification by grace through faith alone. But now the believer had a part in their own conversion. Between 1734 and 1735, Edwards began to see a great number of "surprising conversions" in his Northampton, Massachusetts Church. These conversions, mixed with Edward's millennial theology led him to believe that God was moving in a special way in America. He hoped for a return to the commitment level of the 1630's infused with the emotionality and pietism common to the Moravian Churches.⁴

Similar events to those in Northampton began to take place throughout the colonies as the news of God's special providence spread; the Great Awakening had begun. Williams contends the Great Awakening was a "movement toward a religion of the heart"⁵ initiated by small, local revivals. In this sense, it was a religion of the individual. The movement transcended denominational barriers and included both men and women from every colony and social class. Because of this broad appeal, Williams contends that "attempts to impose a simple economic or political interpretation are ill-advised." Though Williams sees a correlation between the Great Awakening and economic and political issues, he does not see a "causal effect."⁶ Even though the preaching of Jonathon Edwards is not responsible for the Great Awakening, the movement is generally traced to Northampton, Massachusetts. Edwards' idea of a millennial-based American exceptionalism spread as the individualism and emotionalism of the Great Awakening moved beyond the walls of local churches into the social and political dynamics of a budding new nation.

⁴ Dr. Philip C. DiMare, History 170 (lecture, California State University, Sacramento, Fall 2008).

⁵ Williams, 142.

⁶ Ibid.

One man who helped the Great Awakening spread throughout the colonies was George Whitefield. Whitefield, an Anglican preacher from England became known as the grand itinerant for his creation of a pan-colonial preaching circuit. A captivating speaker, Whitefield drew crowds by the thousands, crowds too large to be contained in any church building. This necessitated his having open air meetings which in turn took the gospel beyond the four walls of a church building. Whitefield's emotional preaching produced emotional results. Speaking of Whitefield, one German listener declared that she had never been so edified even though she could not understand a word of English.⁷ Whitefield's open air meetings carried a sense of unity and equality. Rather than being segregated in indoor church services, men, women, and children all listened together, often vying for space. The freedom that people experienced through their individual emotional conversions gave them a boldness to publicly share their faith. It also allowed them to experience God in a way that was not dependent upon the whole congregation. These two freedoms would later be translated into the political realm as colonists spoke freely of their political complaints and began to believe that they no longer needed a king to rule them. In this sense, though the Great Awakening may not have had a causal tie to the American Revolution, there is an unmistakable correlation between the two.

African Americans also mixed with whites in many of Whitefield's services. This gave a sense to some that salvation was open to all mankind. This sense was not shared by all believers. While the Great Awakening, for the first time made faith real to many believers, for most whites, this new faith did not readily open itself up to African Americans. The salvation of blacks became an area of dispute in many white churches. Some contended that blacks could not be saved. Others argued that they should not be saved. Some white Christians were troubled with the thought that if blacks were saved, that their salvation might mean they were equal to whites before God. To most whites in the colonies, both North and South, blacks were little more than a source of labor. While most good Congregationalists could accept the Presbyterians and Anglicans as Christians because of the symbiotic economic relationship that

⁷ Ahlstrom, 283.

had changed the face of the colonies, and many good Protestants could tolerate the Catholic and Jew for the same reason, few were willing to accept blacks on an equal basis. Blacks were not traders or merchants, professionals or growers. With few exceptions, blacks had no economic stake in the colonies and little personal economic power. The only thing most blacks possessed was their capacity for labor. This became their means of acceptance into the American Christian Church. Unlike Native Americans who in the eyes of most colonists were best dealt with when pushed aside or exterminated, the labor of blacks was vital to the prowess of the American Colonial economic juggernaut. Because of this, there was a sense that blacks could be saved for life in the next kingdom – but could not be free here. According to the actions of most American colonists, blacks were not intended to participate in the special millennial move that God was bringing to North America. Conversion did not bring freedom to enslaved blacks. In the few colonies that allowed citizenship to free blacks it was almost always void of many of the benefits enjoyed by white males. Either way, Conversion did not change the political standing of African Americans.

While white Americans struggled with the question of black conversion and their acceptance into the family of God, blacks ignored the white ignorance and were converted by the thousands. Reminded of their African traditions, slave and free were drawn to the emotional conversion experiences afforded them by the Great Awakening. They transformed the Bible from a book of spiritual and moral teachings designed to prepare a soul for the Millennial Reign of Christ and later for an eternity in heaven into a book of deliverance from human bondage applicable to this present life. Stories like the Hebrew's exodus out of Egypt became symbolic of the black quest for freedom from slavery. Blacks sang spiritual songs that not only preached a gospel message but often instilled that same hope of deliverance. While whites may not have had a place for blacks in their millennial-based American exceptionalism of the late eighteenth century, blacks through agency created their own place before God.

The Great Awakening was a time of religious excitement. It was a time when religious Americans believed that God, through his divine providence, was doing something special in America. The religious fervor brought hope that the Millennial Kingdom of Jesus Christ would soon be ushered in. John

Winthrop's "City Upon a Hill" would pale in comparison to this new work of God's providence. The values of Americans were no longer simply American values, based upon the New England Way or an ambiguous Christian work ethic, but were God ordained and personally given to his chosen few who lived in North America: The Chosen Congregationalist and Anglican: the chosen Presbyterian, Baptist, Quaker and Lutheran: the chosen Protestant. All could be a part of this divine move of God - as long as they were white.

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