

GREAT AWAKENING

From the late 1730s to the 1760s a great wave of religious enthusiasm swept over large parts of Britain's North American colonies. This outburst of religious fervor, known as the Great Awakening, set the precedent for what became a recurrent and distinctive feature of American religious life: revivalism.

As far back as the 1720s Theodore Frelinghuysen, influenced by German Pietism, led a renewal of religious enthusiasm among New Jersey congregants of the Dutch Reformed church. About the same time, William and Gilbert Tennent spurred a similar revival among New Jersey Presbyterians. And in 1734 Jonathan Edwards began preaching a powerful but gloomy message of revival to Congregationalists in the Connecticut River valley.

These isolated sparks of religious enthusiasm caught fire when George Whitefield, an English associate of John Wesley, arrived in Georgia in 1738. During his fifteen-month tour of the colonies, Whitefield preached in Charleston, Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. Employing a highly emotional speaking style, Whitefield made audiences shed tears of despair and joy. Thousands flocked to his sermons. His impact was enormous, his method and style widely imitated.

After initially welcoming Whitefield and his fellow revivalists, many clergymen began having second thoughts. Trained in theological seminaries and attached to churches and parishes, they perceived itinerant revivalists—many of whom had no theological training and did not depend on written texts for their sermons—as unorthodox, disruptive to regular churchgoing, and threats to clerical authority. As a result, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and other denominations split into "Old Light" and "New Light" factions, and new sects like the Baptists and Methodists gained many adherents. Such schisms reinforced the divisions in American society between established elites and newer arrivals, town and country, debtors and creditors, and the growing tensions engendered by the spread of the market economy.

Revivalists themselves differed in emphasis, some dwelling on the consequences of eternal damnation, others on the observable effects of sinfulness; some on personal salvation, others on the collective transformation that would occur as a result of the events that would culminate in the Second Coming of Jesus. But the core of revivalism was belief in the sinfulness and helplessness of humankind and the possibility of redemption. To cleanse oneself of sin, to avoid eternal damnation and win eternal salvation, one had to surrender to God's will, to identify completely with Jesus Christ. This decision had to be accompanied by an emotionally wrenching conversion. Such conversion experiences were elicited by itinerant preachers in traveling revivals, called camp meetings, under tents or in open fields or often in churches provided (sometimes grudgingly) by regular clergy.

The Great Awakening extended the reach and scope of religion to the poor, to blacks who had been spurned by the established sects, to people in newly settled areas, and to women who were attracted to the new style of preaching. From the initial wave of fervor in the 1740s, religious enthusiasm ebbed and flowed in the colonies, finally peaking in Virginia in the 1760s. But the disruptions surrounding the Revolution to a large extent displaced religious obsessions in the mind of the public. Revivalism never completely disappeared, however. It would surface again in the nineteenth century in a Second Great Awakening.