

# Everybody 'got religion'

## Edwards, Whitefield, Franklin, and the Great Awakening

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James Whitefield preaches, from a contemporary woodcut.

It was the Age of Reason in Europe and the American colonies. The magical thinking of religion was being challenged as people were learning about new inventions and scientific discoveries — Benjamin Franklin's famous kite experiment occurred around 1751, for instance — that would help them understand the workings of the material universe without relying solely on religious authorities and metaphysical explanations.

The dominant trend witnessed within the American provinces in the early decades of the eighteenth century, as Richard Gray puts it, was the “growing tendency among colonists to accept and practice the ideas of the Enlightenment, albeit usually in popularized form. Those ideas emphasized the determining influence of reason and common sense and the imperatives of self-help, personal and social progress.” Franklin's prescriptive writings, such as “Advice to a Young Tradesman” and “The Way to Wealth,” are all about self-help and personal progress — social, material, financial. His *Autobiography* extols the virtues of reason, common sense, self-reliance, and demonstrates his progress on a personal level (his rise from modest beginnings to affluence and fame) as well as a broader kind of progress on a

societal level brought about through his political endeavours and civic projects. Reason, common sense, self-help, and personal and social progress represented “an ethic with an obvious attraction for new generations of immigrants eager to stake their place and improve their lot in a new land with such abundant resources” (Gray 55). America's prescriptive literature promised all these things: vocations, financial stability, real estate, happiness. Indeed, as Perry Miller puts it, “after 1715 all the colonies were prospering economically; inevitably they became more and more concerned with earthly things — rum, land, furs” (159).

A corresponding decline in church attendance occurred not only because of the nation's growing secularism but also because of the tedious nature of the traditional Puritan sermon. Furthermore, many of those Christians who remained serious about otherworldly salvation had jettisoned the Calvinistic emphasis on predestination (the idea that God has already selected who would be saved or damned regardless of their moral behaviour) in favour of the doctrine (Arminianism) that they could be saved by good works and upright conduct: they believed they had a hand in their own election or reprobation and therefore rejected the conventional Calvinistic doctrine of humanity as hopelessly immoral. Some cultural spokesmen for the spirit of the Enlightenment went so far as to argue that through the application of reason we could in fact eradicate human imperfection. Franklin reports his personal experiment along those lines — apparently in all seriousness: “It was about this time I conceived the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection. I wished to live without committing any fault at any time . . .” (*Autobiography* 75).

The Old-School Puritan preachers were alarmed at people's reckless faith in human reason and human perfectibility (the spread of Enlightenment values) and what they considered the incorrect doctrine of Good Works as leading to

spiritual salvation. But they were also distressed at the growing secularism and materialism of colonial Americans. People were actually happy, and hopeful — and forgetting God. Something had to be done! Announced in John Winthrop's 1630 sermon "A Model of Christian Charity," their forefathers' vision of the New World as a "City on a Hill" — a Quaker-lashing, antinomian-banishing, Indian-murdering, witch-hanging paradigm for the entire Protestant world to emulate — was falling apart. The Puritan culture of New England was in decline. The cocky, arrogant, money-grubbing, self-reliant colonists were becoming what we now recognize as modern Americans, *Yankees*. People had to be shaken up; they needed to return to the original vision of the Puritan Founding Fathers. As well, doctrinally, parishioners needed to be reminded that God alone, a terrifying, mysterious, angry deity, determined upon the saved and the damned and that people had no control over the matter — except through a genuine spiritual awakening through which they became convinced that the grace of God had touched them, was working in them as a sign that they might be among the Elect. People, in short, were *no damned good* and desperately needed to be reminded of that fact. They needed to be humbled; someone needed to *scare the hell out of them*. What was needed was a Great Awakening in religious piety and right-thinking. The storm would come in the late 1730s and last into the next decade; it would wash over all of the American colonies.

A major architect of the Great Awakening was Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758). Throughout his life, Edwards preached in his sermons against an unwarranted belief in secular reason when it came to theological matters; he believed human rationality was unreliable and that human beings are corrupt to the core, ultimately incapable of doing anything truly virtuous. While Franklin is very much a representative of the Age of Reason in his apparent belief in moral perfectibility and in his endorsement of science and technology as manifestations of reason, Edwards is on the opposite end of the scale in qualifying the effectiveness of rationality and in his insistence that people are morally worthless and deserving of eternal damnation. To make this point, he preached

several times in 1741 — the height of the Great Awakening — what is considered the most famous sermon ever presented on American soil, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Here are some of the more notorious excerpts:

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. . . . 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. . . .

How dreadful is the state of those that are daily and hourly in the danger of this great wrath and infinite misery! But this is the dismal case of every soul in this congregation that has not been born again, however moral and strict, sober and religious, they may otherwise be. . . . There is reason to think, that there are many in this congregation now hearing this discourse, that will actually be the subjects of this very misery to all eternity. . . . And it would be a wonder, if some that are now present should not be in hell in a very short time, even before this year is out. And it would be no wonder if some persons, that now sit here, in some seats of this meeting-house, in health, quiet and secure, should be there before tomorrow morning. . . . (23-27)

Edwards's training in prose style and rhetoric is clear; note, for instance, his deliberately climactic arrangement: God's wrath could have fallen on you last night, this morning, an hour ago — could fall on you *now*! The sense Edwards creates is that God's wrath is coming, getting nearer, nearer, is outside the door, is here! He gradually but quickly intensifies the sense of urgency in his flock to be born again before it is too late. Is it any wonder that after this sermon his congregation rose weeping and moaning? Orville Hitchcock says, "The emotional reactions of the listeners naturally led to some unfortunate results. Some of them were so carried away by their

feelings that they attempted to commit suicide, and a few succeeded" (234).

Despite the sulfur-and-brimstone visual images and themes in "Sinners," most of Edwards's sermons stressed not the emotion of dread but rather the ecstatic joy and bliss one feels in God's grace. Perhaps "Sinners," then, is representative of the harshness of Calvinist doctrine but unrepresentative as a Great Awakening sermon in its emphasis on terror rather than elation. Joanne Van der Woude defines the Great Awakening as "a series of religious revivals in the American colonies in which people experienced a 'new Birth': described as an acute awareness of sight, sound, and inward feeling, as if just awakened from sleep" (79) — or *being born again*. The idea of this new spiritual rebirth Edwards considered "the principle hinge of Protestantism" (*Heimert 116*). People needed to be

awakened from what Edwards called their old complacency. It is not enough simply to attend church every Sunday and call ourselves Christians; we must be born again in Christ, experience God's grace working through us — be truly converted. It is not enough for the preachers simply to give us moral instructions on how to be good Christians; the Great Awakening conversion experience was not intellectual or abstract, it was overwhelmingly emotional. Think of the people we call "holy rollers" or watch certain Christian denominations on television — Baptists, for example — with members of the congregation rolling about on the floor, jumping up and down, laughing, singing, speaking in "tongues," shaking — presumably evidence of God working directly within them. They are experiencing "corporeal pleasure in the presence of God" (*Van der Woude 82*). During the large assemblies of the Great Awakening, scores of people would weep and break out spontaneously into song.

In short, the Great Awakening was a bringing back of people to the Christian flock largely through a rebirth of emotionalism in religion — through the terrors of threatened damnation but also more importantly through the visceral joys in the promise of salvation and the grace of God. Its

legacy survives in Methodism and Baptism, which were at the time relatively new denominations that expanded their membership as a direct result of their participation in the Great Awakening movement. On one hand, then, the movement has been called Puritanism's last gasp, the final flare-up of old-time Calvinism before the secularism of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment took over in America; in fact, the emotionalism of the movement was anything but Puritanical. Where it was Puritanical was in the emphasis on human weaknesses and moral turpitude, certainly; in its

emphasis on conversion, grace, and the bodily signs thereof, it was evangelical. "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" is Puritanical in its vivid hell-fire-and-damnation terrors, but more of Edwards's sermons concentrate on the love and bliss the convert

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feels in experiencing God's grace; in this sense, by anticipating the evangelical movement in American religion, Edwards arguably helped bring a close to the old-time Calvinism he sought so desperately to reinforce! Who would not want to flee the angry God of Calvinist doctrine in favour of the blissful emotionalism of the evangelicals? They put the *fun* back in fundamentalism! The Great Awakening proper has been called "a significant 'watershed' in [American] intellectual, social, and even political history" (*Heimert 114*).

\* \* \*

It all started in New England around 1739 when a Methodist evangelist from England, George Whitefield (1714-1770), visited the Thirteen Colonies with his sensational style of preaching. Edwards helped Whitefield arrange his American tour and in 1740 invited Whitefield to preach in *his* parish, perhaps because the initial enthusiasm for conversion Edwards started in 1733 had died off by 1736. Whitefield was called the Grand Itinerant and his style of preaching was probably quite a change from what people were used to — many no doubt found it refreshing. He would mirror the emotionalism he hoped to bring

about in his audience by physically acting out such emotions as fear and rapture, stomping around on stage, crawling on all fours, breaking down into tears, generally making a spectacle of himself. Whitefield drew tens of thousands of people to his sermons — as attested to, for instance, by Franklin.

One aspect of the *Autobiography* that makes it enduring and interesting for scholars of eighteenth-century America is, indeed, the picture Franklin provides of Whitefield and the impact his preaching had during a significant moment in the social and religious life of the nation. Franklin not only heard the famous sermons of the Grand Itinerant but also came to know him. In fact, he offered to lodge the traveling preacher while he was in Philadelphia; in the end, he became “intimately acquainted” with Whitefield because Franklin was employed in printing Whitefield’s sermons and journals (98). An irony is at work here, too: we consider Franklin the great exemplar of reason, the Enlightenment man *par excellence*; yet the preachers of the Great Awakening, like Edwards and Whitefield, were reacting in part against the materialism, the secularism, the prideful rationalism, the self-reliant intellectualism, of Enlightenment values. One of the more humorous passages in the *Autobiography* is when Franklin confides to us that Whitefield “used, indeed, sometimes to pray for my conversion but never had the satisfaction of believing that his prayers were heard” (99).

Scholars have not been able to come to a consensus about the ultimate impact of the Great Awakening. Some remind us that revivals are not a particularly American phenomenon; as Miller says, “Between about 1730 and 1760 practically all of Western Europe was swept by some kind of religious emotionalism” (156). Others see it as a watershed moment in the religious life of the nation. Van der Woude suggests that, as a result of Edwards’s and Whitefield’s preaching style, there occurred a shift “in theological emphasis from doctrine to discourse” (83); “These events all stressed personal affect and reconfigured the place of emotion in religious experience.” The new spiritual experience was now in place as an alternative to the tradition of long, boring Puritan sermons with their rigid rhetorical structure,

careful rational demonstrations, and scholarly biblical exegesis; now preachers inspired by Edwards, Whitefield, and other Great Awakening orators were more concerned with the emotional effects of religious discourse on their congregations, and their testimony to born-again experiences. Perhaps this is another way of saying that American colonial churches saw a *dumbing down* of the religious experience of churchgoers. Even the preachers adopted a theatricality to their sermonic performances like the ones we can see on televangelist programs. Van der Woude refers to this phenomenon as “the spectacle of religion in America, where some evangelicals still shake and tremble, speak in tongues, and handle snakes” (84). The revivals of the period also saw a shift from the authority of the carefully trained pastors to the testimony of the congregation. Heimert calls this a “popularizing and democratizing” of the relationship between preacher and congregation (119). Some people, such as Gilbert Tennent, argued that anyone who had had a conversion experience was qualified to preach and teach, even children. That this concept persists in our time is demonstrated, for example, in the 1972 Academy-Award-winning documentary *Marjoe*, about a precocious boy preacher, Marjoe Gortner, who was especially popular in — where else? — the American South. The Great Awakening also saw, according to Van der Woude, the infusion of political opinion into religion.

I have discussed some of the effects, the changes, in American religion allegedly brought about by the Great Awakening, as suggested by several scholars and experts, but others argue that it is possible to overestimate the impact of the revivalist movement on the religious life of Eastern-seaboard colonists. Jon Butler cites the phenomenon as a perfect example of the adage that history is not what happened but is what people *say* happened. In other words, sometimes historians, through biases, or through overemphasizing or underemphasizing historical events and personalities, create a perception of what happened quite different from what really, in fact, may have occurred. Butler insists that the movement did not have the lasting impact attributed to it by some of our more contemporary historians and commentators. For example, he



maintains that the revivals “attracted more spectators than converts . . . only a few listeners converted — easily less than 1 percent — a pattern that has dogged revivalists ever since, whether Charles Finney in the nineteenth century or Billy Graham in the twentieth. In the wake of such revivals, membership quickly fell back, the number of young male converts declined, and older members again outnumbered the young” (283). In other words, the initial religious fervor of the revival wore off and many people relapsed into their complacent, sinful ways.

That pattern of revival and relapse is certainly at work in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by that well-known atheist and despiser of religion, Mark Twain, who satirically describes a revival event that happens in Tom’s Midwestern town while he was sick in bed with the measles:

When he got upon his feet at last and moved feebly downtown, a melancholy change had come over everything and every creature. There had been a “revival,” and everybody had “got religion”. . . . He found Joe Harper studying a Testament, and turned sadly away from the depressing spectacle. He sought Ben Rogers, and found him visiting the poor with a basket of tracts. He hunted up Jim Hollis, who called his attention to the precious blessing of his late measles as a warning. Every boy he encountered added another ton to his depression; and when, in desperation, he flew

for refuge at last to the bosom of Huckleberry Finn and was received with a Scriptural quotation, his heart broke and he crept home and to bed realizing that he alone of all the town was lost, forever and forever. (117)

Then Tom goes to bed that night and, during a terrible thunderstorm, believes that God got up the storm deliberately to crush the life out of Tom for his not having been saved during the revival. Tom in terror even thinks of himself as an insect about to be smashed by the Almighty — quite possibly an image Mark Twain derived from “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”:

By and by the tempest spent itself and died without accomplishing its object. The boy’s first impulse was to be grateful, and reform. His second was to wait — for there might not be any more storms.

The next day the doctors were back; Tom had relapsed. The three weeks he spent on his back this time seemed an entire age. When he got abroad at last he . . . drifted listlessly down the street and found . . . Joe Harper and Huck Finn up an alley eating a stolen melon. Poor lads! They — like Tom — had suffered a relapse (118).

\* \* \*

These ideological tensions persist in modern America, certainly — the old conflict between Protestant theology and secular humanism, which

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