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## THE PRIMARY ROLE OF THE FIRST GREAT AWAKENING (AMERICAN REVIVALISM) IN THE SHAPING OF AMERICAN IDENTITY

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### Abstract

Much ink has been spilled upon the onset and the evolution of the Great Awakenings in American religious history. Yet, there has been a lack of interest as regards to their substantial effects upon the American identity. To illustrate, American historians or historians, in general, seem to attach much weight to the First Great Awakening; however, how it affected the American character in Colonial America has generally been overlooked. The First Great Awakening left an indelible mark on American culture and identity. By the time the decline in religious piety beset the society, the First Great Awakening, no doubt, endowed the colonists with shared national religious experience as they commenced to sever all ties with religion. They needed to be recaptured that their duty was to follow the Law of God, stick to the covenant, and build the City upon a Hill instead of becoming the beacon of licentiousness and infidelity. The Evangelical Revival (the Awakening) became the wake-up call of that newly established society and created a robust shared identity that would draw them out from the pit of hell. In this article, I aim to reveal how the First Great Awakening shaped the American identity by referring to the Evangelical revivals and historical records of the United States in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

**Keywords:** Colonial America, Evangelical Revival, The Great Awakening, American Identity.

### Introduction

The Great Awakening (American Revivalism), occasionally called the First Great Awakening or the Evangelical Revival, is generally characterized as a period in the eighteenth century (the 1730s - 1740s) in Colonial America, and it literally generated a spiritual atmosphere and a renaissance to churches and disbelievers of the British-American colonies. In the most general sense, it has been the shaping power of American culture and identity, yet above all, it has had a remarkable role on the American church as well. It was also the first experience shared by myriads of people in the American colonies. By means of the awakening, the young colonies were swept with evangelical ebullience; thus, the revivals in many parts of the colonies gave colonial society a deep religious shock and recovering. They were spiritually reborn from their ashes. McLoughlin states in his work titled *Role of Religion: Essays on the American Revolution* that "As I see it, the Great Awakening was really the beginning of America's identity as a nation" (McLoughlin, 1973, 198).

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## 1. A Concise Background of The First Great Awakening

"Awakenings begin in periods of cultural distortion and grave personal stress when we lose faith in the legitimacy of our norms, the viability of our institutions, and the authority of our leaders in church and state. They eventuate in basic restructurings of our institutions and redefinitions of our social goals" (McLoughlin, 1980, 2). As the late seventeenth and the early eighteenth centuries are closely viewed through religious aspects, it was quite conspicuous that colonial America had already toddled away from religious devotion, and the spiritual environment was on the verge of vanishing by the time the first sparks of revivals commenced. The reasons for coming to the new world for the colonists were actually clear:

*"America as ancient Israel. America's historical role parallels that of ancient Israel: Americans are God's special people, sent into a desert wilderness to carry out a divine "errand" there and set an example for the world. This country will prosper if its people remain faithful to the word of God. If they depart from it, worshipping new gods, they will be severely chastised and suffer defeats from their enemies." (McKenna, 2007, 49).*

However, eighteenth-century Americans were not prospering or willing to maintain the first settlers' ardent adherence to their faith. Clearly saying, the early Pilgrims arrived in the new world with the ablaze intention of establishing a godly nation. Yet, there occurred an apparent decline in religious piety in later generations. "By the early eighteenth century, the clergy and sensitive citizens became increasingly aware that religion was dead and that Americans did not bother sufficiently with ultimate questions such as the salvation of their souls" (Schultz, 1981, 260). The children of the first colonists began to connect with creating affluence and establishing a laid-back lifestyle. The Kingdom of God was of secondary importance any longer. People, in no small measure, considered that religion was dry, bleak, insignificant, and inapproachable. They gradually began to feel the perception that they did not select their religion with their free will, it was their ancestors who made this choice for them. "The spiritual ideals of the Pilgrims had been largely forgotten, and serious theological and moral decline had set in. The wellsprings of piety that had flowed freely in an earlier generation had run nearly dry. Ardent devotion had given way to self-satisfaction and indifference" (Thornbury, 1995, 16). The colonists were far from spirituality and were absorbed mainly with political issues, inebriation, and amorality. Put it differently, they were morally corrupted and were possessed with self-satisfaction, yet there was little or no commitment to the Law of God. They had practically no zeal to attend the churches. Besides, adherence, or in the strictest sense of the word, devotedness to Christian values was not the point in question. Once they went to the churches, they had no sign of spiritual renewal. They were physically at the churches, yet there was not any spirituality in their worship.

*"Our five awakenings came about when, by the standards of our culture core and the experiences of daily life, our society deviated too far from the moral and religious understandings that legitimized authority in church and state. Not surprisingly, each of our awakenings in the past (and undoubtedly the same will hold for our current one as well) has been followed by a period of drastic (once, truly revolutionary) restructuring of our social, political, and economic institutions." (McLoughlin, 1980, 11).*

Another reason that the colonists were not willing to get closer to religion or were indifferent to God's words was that "The earlier Puritans required that those who were admitted to the Lord's supper give evidence of being genuinely converted" (Thornbury, 1995, 17). Due to the fact that there were some strict rules and standards for the church participation, the colonists backslid gradually and were unable to fulfill their religious duties. This apathetic and dismal attitude towards religion was widespread throughout the nation. "Religion lay as it were dying and ready to expire its last breath of life in this part of the visible church" (Schultz, 1981, 260). Besides, the religious atmosphere of colonial America in the seventeenth century was well defined by American Congregational Minister Cotton Mather:

*"It is confessed by all who know anything of the matter ... that there is a general and horrible decay of Christianity, among the professors of it ... the modern Christianity is too generally but a very spectre, scarce a shadow of the ancient. Ah! Sinful nations. Ah! Children that are corrupters; what have your hands done! ... So notorious is this decay of Christianity that whole books are even now and then written to inquire into it" (Dallimore, 1970, 413).*

However, this conjuncture had already become a deep grief in the hearts of two very significant and religious figures of American religious history; colonial pastor Jonathan Edwards and English evangelist George Whitefield. There were, of course, many itinerant parsons or chief figures like John Winthrop in the colonies to deliver the divine message of Christ or to establish an example country to the world; however, these eighteenth-century Protestant heroes - Edwards and Whitefield - were the forerunners and instigated a widespread spiritual devotion throughout the British-American colonies. "Preachers began warning their



people that worldliness, luxury, and religious indifference were starting to creep in to what had been a pristine 'City upon a Hill,' which habits – unless they repented and re-covered the original spirit of their founders – would surely lead them to ruin" (McKenna, 2007, 40).

*"The Puritans carried their Reformed faith with them to the New World. It was John Winthrop's belief in Providentialism that inspired him to write A Model of Christian Charity in which he stated that Puritan America would be "as a City on a Hill," with "the eyes of all people" upon her. It was the Puritans commitment to Covenantalism that bound their understanding of Providentialism and jurisdiction to each individual, bound each individual to God and the Church body, and finally bound the Church body to the greater body of peoples within their society. (Quirion, 2015, 5).*

The colonists desperately needed a spark or a motive to ignite the old fire once again that the first settlers brought as they arrived in the new world. The sparks would be the diligent and volunteer preachers who considered that people were in need of turning into their inner emotions. "These men, and others who helped advance the awakening, emphasized direct, personal experience of God and the sinner's utter dependence on God's mercy. Powerful, fiery orators, masters of persuasion, they excited their audiences calculatedly by hammering at man's sinfulness and helplessness and at his crucial need to become convinced of his own depravity" (Griffin, 1980, 46). They – the colonists – had to remember their duty of creating or building the City upon a Hill, which would make them shine like a precedent to the whole world. In brief, with the help of these leaders (preachers), the colonists would find "reality – a new sense of reality, of identity, and self-confidence, and, above all, a revision of their institutional structure that will return daily life to regularity and order" (McLoughlin, 1980, 12).

Edwards and Whitefield mostly urged upon the concept of sin. In other words, the colonists were tried to be convinced that they had grievously sinned, thus this gradually created repentance, and immediately afterwards they were convinced of their conversions, which began to change the atmosphere in the colonies. Moreover, on the one hand the colonists were not content with what they had done to themselves by not abiding by the Law of God, on the other hand indifference made them blind and they were unable to move on in darkness. They had an ambiguous feeling of both the hope of attaining salvation and the fearful actions of God upon the backsliders.

*"The Puritans were a chosen people; of that they were certain. Yet they feared that their habitual blindness and unfaithfulness would trigger divine retribution – feared, yet in a way hoped, for it would show that God does indeed intervene in history to punish wrongdoers and backsliders. So, they scrutinized all the events of their time, from the Indians wars and the loss of their colonial charter to the witchcraft trials, as evidence that God had some serious issues with his people. The distinctive legacy of New England Puritan rhetoric, then, is this strange two-sidedness: on the one hand, a confident sense of 'chosenness'; on the other hand, remorse, repentance, and the dread that God might at any time "cast us off in displeasure, and scatter us in this Wilderness" (McKenna, 2007, 41).*

George Whitefield was a talented and devoted public speaker and mostly preached about "the desperate depravity of human nature, the absolute necessity of Regeneration, and Justification by faith" (Thornbury, 1995, 20). His sermons were extraordinarily influential, drew thousands of listeners, and created an enormous moral impact on people. "Whitefield preached to a crowd of 15.000 persons on Society Hill. He so far succeeded to repress the usual public amusements as that the dancing school was discontinued, and the ball and concert room were shut up, as inconsistent with the requisitions of the gospel. The change to religion here is altogether surprising, through the influence of Whitefield – no books sell but religious" (Watson, 1830, 173). Whitefield was well aware of the fact that he had to use plain language to plain people. That is, simple language rather than fancy or disorienting words would most likely persuade the ordinary people, and that was the case too. He was able to lower himself to the public's level and delivered God's messages hectically. With the efforts and evangelistic tours of Whitefield in colonies, inconsideration and indifference in religion quickly began to leave its place to mass revivals, reconsideration, and spiritual regeneration.

*"Whitefield visited Philadelphia again three times in 1740, and in that year, a hall was erected in the city for his use and that of any other Protestant minister who might wish to use it; it was transferred to the trustees of the Academy and College of Philadelphia in 1750. Of his preaching he wrote, "It was wonderful to see the change soon made in the Manners of our Inhabitants; from being thoughtless or indifferent about religion, it seem'd as if all the World were growing Religious; so that one could not walk thro' the Town in an Evening without Hearing Psalms sung in different Families of every Street." (Franklin, 1936, 133).*



**Figure 1:** George Whitefield Preaching in Bolton, June 1750



**Source:** "George Whitefield Bolton Sermon" (2019). <https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/george-whitefield-preaching-in-bolton-june-1750-163882#> (27.09.2019)

As for Edwards, he carried out fruitful revival blessings like Whitefield in the Congregational Church in the sleepy Massachusetts town of Northampton. He carefully pored over that there was a severe downgrade in religious – Christian – behavior, and the colonists needed to be jolted as soon as possible. "A worldly spirit prevailed; the young people absented themselves from public worship and the restraints of family influence; licentiousness grossly abounded, and the Sabbath was turned into a day of amusement," and there was a "prevailing laxity in morals, discipline, and doctrine." (Dorchester, 2009, 141). Edwards' method of speaking was not very powerful, yet his words and rhetoric were so meaningful and imposing that many people, from the notorious sinners to the cream of society, were converted in a short span of time. Edwards put great emphasis on the original sin, which in general accepts that human beings are innately inclined to follow the evil. He also gave importance to God's sovereignty and Justification by faith. In his *Narrative of Surprising Conversions*, Edwards depicts the situation in his church;

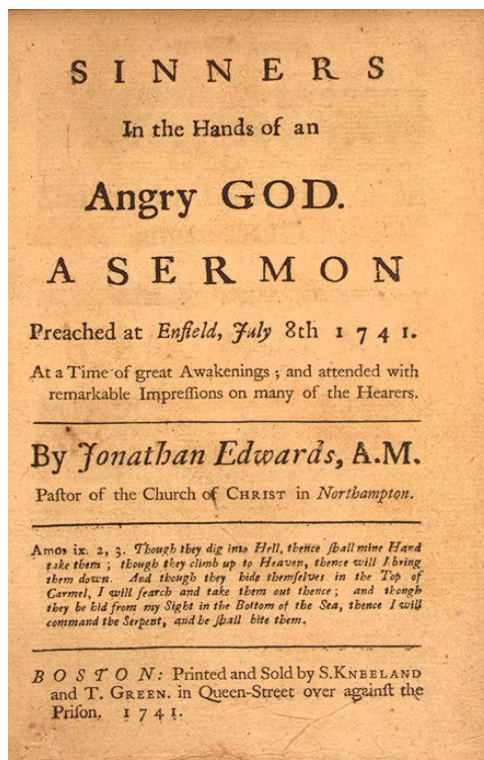
*"The Spirit of God began extraordinarily to set in and wonderfully work among us... Presently ... a great and earnest concern about the great things of religion and the eternal world became universal in all parts of the town, and among persons of all degrees and of all ages. The noise among the drybones waxed louder and louder; all other talks but about spiritual and eternal things were soon thrown by... The only thing in their view was to get the kingdom of heaven, and every one appeared pressing into it. The engagedness of their hearts in this great concern could not be hidden, and it appeared in their very countenances. It was then a dreadful thing amongst us to lie out of Christ, of danger every day of dropping into hell ... and the work of conversion was carried on in a most astonishing manner, and increased more and more. Souls did, as it were, come by flocks to Jesus Christ."* (Edwards, 1847, 135).

During his sermons in the colonies, people gradually began to feel the wriggle of the Holy Spirit that helped them to move away from the indifference to an awakening of their souls. On July 8, 1741, there occurred his most famous sermon called *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, and it emotionally and spiritually swept over the colonists. He persistently accentuated that God's judgement would absolutely come, and it would be very fearful and painful. He clearly expressed the fires of Hell, talked metaphorically about the pits of fires and displayed the visualization of the day of reckoning. Should people do not change the way they live, they will always remain as the sinners in the hands of an angry God. His message was clear that people had to prepare themselves before the judgement day comes. His sermon was a big deal in those days in terms of spreading the revival, and people from all walks of life, from the impoverished populace to the wealthy tradesmen, experienced regeneration and rebirth in religion. "Everyone was involved in the Awakening. As one student of it has concluded "There is ... abundant evidence that this religious turmoil was in fact general and general that



it knew no boundaries, social or geographical, that it was both urban and rural, and it reached both lower and upper classes" (Griffin, 1980, 47).

**Figure 2:** Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God, A Sermon Preached at Enfield, July 8, 1741, by Rev. Jonathan Edwards



Source: "Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God" (The Library of Congress) (2019).  
<https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/vc006806.jpg> (29.10.2019)

## 2. The Role of The Awakening in The Shaping of American Identity

"The religious revivals extended beyond denominational and ethnic borders. In Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island most of the revivals happened among Congregationalists, largely Presbyterian and Scottish, with some German and Dutch participation. In later years there were Baptists and Methodists among the participants, and while some were strict Calvinists" (McKenna, 2007, 54). The Great Awakening became the ultimate solution for the likely ruin of those people from different denominations and backgrounds, and dozens of revivals that took place not only in New England but also in the middle colonies such as Delaware, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and also in New York, became the first shared experience of the colonists. They felt nearly the same spirituality, thought about their deeds, actions and sins, and shared the same religious awareness for the first time. They were again on the way of becoming one and united nation. They would perpetuate their fathers' holy duty of becoming an example nation of the world. In a word, religious revivals profoundly shaped the colonists up, and they ultimately blew the cobwebs away.

*"The Great Awakening represented in one way or another a massive defiance of traditional authority. Yet it led not to chaos but to a new kind of order. The Awakening gave Americans a palpable sense of brotherhood; it ran like an electric current through the revivals. As Heimert observes, "Not liberty, nor even equality, was, as it turned out, the essence of the Awakening, but fraternity. In the course of the eighteenth century many Calvinists were to be shocked as they saw the single end toward which all the strains of Providence and grace tended. But the spirit aroused in 1740 proved to be that of American nationalism. (McKenna, 2007, 65).*

The religious revivals, as it was defined, were not confined to a specific place; thus, it invigorated large numbers of people through up and down the Eastern coast of the New World. "The religious inflammation that spread through all of the colonies resulted in America's first truly national event, which bound together many diverse interests among the thirteen colonies and provided a thread of unity that ran throughout the group" (Noll, 1989, 54). Their background did not inhibit what they shared previously. Their concurrence upon one crucial point was that "The sole authority in religion is the Bible and the sole means of salvation is a life-transforming experience wrought by the Holy Spirit through faith in Jesus Christ" (Bercovitch, 2011, 143).



Another significant effect of the Great Awakening in the colonies was that people began to oppugn the notion of a single truth in religion or a unique church conception just like it existed in the United Kingdom. They were aware of the fact that it was now possible for themselves to perform their religious tasks. The colonists thought that they were capable of performing their worship instead of depending on a church or an institution. "The Great Awakening was a social movement of such magnitude and extensity as to disrupt the traditional religious institution, facilitating the emergence of a functionally differentiated religious order more compatible with a behavioral disposition toward individualism, voluntarism, and democracy and a new institutional dominance residing in the polity and the economy. (Rossel, 1970, 924). The former established churches such as the Puritans and the Anglicans gradually began to lose their significance in society due to the fact that they did not have enough power and credibility to religiously represent most of the colonists. Hence, many new denominations (congregations) emerged.

*"The specific revivals and revival leaders within those broad periods generate or articulate not a single theological system but a set of commonly shared beliefs and practices that cut across the specific denominational lines that divide American ecclesiastical life. Denominational organizations, sects and cults provide alternative strategies within the grand overall design of revitalization suitable to the various regional, class, color, ethnic, or educational groups within the nation as they cope with the broad necessities of social change." (McLoughlin, 1980, 10).*

One significant point has to be underscored hereby that the emergence of these new denominations was not considered as a separatist movement against the unity of religion; quite the contrary, they were acknowledged as a new unifying constituent and paved the way for establishing national consciousness and a new American spirit. "The soul grappling of the Great Awakening had their external effects: breaking down class barriers as people of different stations met together in the public arena, praying together, sometimes shouting together, moved by the Holy Spirit; teaching ordinary people, both men and women, that they could reach heights of spirituality without the paternal guidance of their pastors." (McKenna, 2007, 78). As it is seen clearly, the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a religious pluralism in Colonial America, and the colonists felt no strong affiliation to a single church or sect any longer.

### Conclusion

"Americans were uneasy with their increasing materialism, selfishness, loss of purpose, and moral corruption in the half of the eighteenth century." (McLoughlin, 1967, 110). In other words, colonial America had moved away from religious devotion, and the spiritual atmosphere was at the point of vanishment at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The children of the first colonists thought only about creating wealth and establishing a laid-back lifestyle. They were morally corrupted and were possessed with self-satisfaction, yet there was nearly no commitment to the Law of God. However, Whitefield and Edwards got the responsibility of waking up this sleepy society and once again tried to light the religious fire in the hearts of the colonists. Edwards and Whitefield mostly put emphasis on the original sin, and their main objective was to convince the colonists that they were innate transgressors and had to show repentance to God. Their praiseworthy efforts ultimately found their places in society and began to change the atmosphere. It was as clear as crystal that the colonists desperately needed a spark or a motion to regain their consciousness. They gradually remembered their duty of coming to the New World, and various religious revivals which are generally called the First Great Awakening occurred in the colonies. The First Great Awakening is considered to be the first experience shared by myriads of people across the thirteen American colonies and thus established a shared and collective American identity. It literally represented a sort of spiritual rebellion against affectedness in religion and hypocrisy in existing churches. The emergent national consciousness towards the concept of sinfulness came into question in a more influential way, and thus the colonists (The New Americans) turned their faces to God. Plus, together with the Great Awakening, people began to fathom that there was no chain of authority for God's will. It was comprehended that there was no explicit need for a church or another religious institution between man and God. This radical change in both religion and social life naturally posed a threat to the religious and political order, and it later led to the American Revolution in the years to come.

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