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"Most Were Much Affected and Many In Much Distress:" The Great Awakening

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(Article begins on next page)

1733—Great Awakening, Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield

“most were much affected & many in much distress”

In the autumn of 1740, Samuel Belcher, a saddler in colonial Connecticut, had a sudden conversion experience. For a while, he had been worrying about sin and damnation, observing “what a Dreadfull thing it was to fall into the hands of an angry God,” and had enviously regarded his friends and neighbors who visibly felt “the wonderfull workings of the Spirit of God upon the[ir] hearts.” Belcher worshiped in the congregation led by Jonathan Edwards, a community that had seen a religious revival five years before, with, according to their preacher, many “surprizing conversions” and young people “reforming their frolicking ways.” But Belcher did not convert until the transatlantic celebrity George Whitefield came to town, whose preaching prompted an intensely emotional experience of God’s grace. “I was awakened up,” writes Belcher, who, by hearing both Edwards and Whitefield, stood, unawares, at the heart of what is known as the Great Awakening.

The Great Awakening was 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 woken from sleep. This religious fervor, which started in New England before spreading to the Middle Colonies and Virginia in the 1740s and 1750s, manifested itself in scenes of mass conversion, often accompanied by communal weeping and spontaneous singing. Some congregations developed “soul exercises” such as trembling and shaking to encourage and display the bodily signs of the spirit. Despite concerns about excessive emotionalism and clerical fears that individual experience came to rival church authority, the

revivals continued unabated, appealing to the masses by their replacement of older schemes of careful intellectual preparation with an immediate, overpowering experience of conversion.

The only problem is: the Great Awakening may never have happened. The varied and fragmented nature of the revivals and the arguable absence of any long-term consequences contradict the idea that a single religious movement swept the colonies. And if such unified fervor did exist, it could be similar to European post-Reformation revivals, rather than a uniquely American phenomenon. Though scholarly skepticism is certainly warranted, it is still helpful to think of the Great Awakening as an integrated series of events, as that interpretation constructively (re-)contextualizes the colonies within a transatlantic movement towards spiritual renewal, while explaining characteristic features of American religious life.

Many regional revivals were sparked or linked by the activities of George Whitefield, an English itinerant preacher who came to America in 1739 and drew crowds of tens of thousands of people to his open-air sermons. Whitefield—drawn to the theater as a boy—had cultivated a highly dramatic style of preaching and his homiletic performances, during which he physically acted out fear and rapture, were widely recognized as sensational. Stomping and cavorting on stage, crawling on his knees, and breaking down in tears, Whitefield exhibited the overpowering effects of divine power on his body, often exclaiming (“Ah! Oh!”) as much as speaking. He was accused of exchanging theatrics for substance and, like many celebrity preachers—a persona he arguably pioneered and which remains current in the American context as seen in the twentieth-century success of Billy Graham—he rarely influenced church attendance or affect permanent change in religious behavior.

Whitefield’s sermons were mainly oral and visual spectacles, and he made his way into American literary history through others’ writings: Benjamin Franklin caustically noted

Whitefield's "wonderful power over the hearts and purses of his hearers" and the fame of Phillis Wheatley, a black female poet from Boston, largely rested on her elegy on Whitefield. Olaudah Equiano, in his anti-slave-trade autobiography, remembers how hard Whitefield worked while preaching, comparing his exertions to slave labor: "he sweat[ed] as much as I ever did while in slavery on Montserrat beach [...] I had never before seen divines exert themselves in this manner." Note that Equiano does not mention anything Whitefield said, only what he looked like, underscoring the preacher's visual and physical appeal. Samson Occom, a Mohegan leader and Christian missionary, also remembered Whitefield's physical antics: "he stretched himself upon the ground flat on his face and reached his hands forward, and made a mark with his Hand [...] Some were frightened." Whitefield mentored Occom and invited the Indian to come preach in England as an itinerant: the mode that Whitefield pioneered and which continues to be characteristic of revivalist movements in America.

Itinerancy, whereby a preacher travels around, unconnected to a parish or congregation, was widely perceived as a threat to the social order because it situated religious practice and instruction outside the physical structure, and therefore outside the control of the established church. Itinerants also formed a system of mass communication of sorts between settlers in colonial America. Whitefield didn't just rely on word of mouth, however, but also used print networks to advertise and promote his appearances. Other itinerants, such as Gilbert Tennent, challenged orthodoxy more directly: preaching against the American Presbyterian church, Tennent famously defined the qualifications of a good minister as personal experience of grace and active faith, rather than credentials. It was, he argued, a good idea not only for ministers to preach in another's territory but also for churchgoers to leave their congregations in search of

spiritual growth—a notion that undermined the parish system central to organized religion in the American colonies.

Though some itinerants had no formal training, most were educated and ordained within a Protestant denomination (usually Anglican, Congregationalist, or Presbyterian). Tennent's radical idea that an immediate knowledge of grace qualifies one to preach and teach still subsists in the phenomenon of lay or even child preachers in American evangelicalism today. The translation of spiritual authority into political opinion also has its origins in the eighteenth-century revivals. Whitefield advocated educating and christianizing slaves; a perspective which, though he never spoke out directly against the institution of slavery, led him to be blamed for "encourag[ing] the negroes" during the New York slave conspiracy of 1741. Itinerants fostered an inclusive form of religion, creating communities in open fields rather than church pews, without regard for race, gender, and class. Whitefield (known as the Grand Itinerant), David Brainerd (a missionary to the Indians), and Eleazar Wheelock (the future founder of Dartmouth College) were perceived as proponents of racial equality and social activism: elements that would become more pronounced during the Second Great Awakening in the early nineteenth century.

The cross-cultural and cross-regional appeal of religious revivalism in the mid-eighteenth century is vividly illustrated by the so-called Indian Great Awakening. From the 1740s to the 1760s, Delaware and Mahicans in Pennsylvania experienced a period of religious revitalization consisting of a return to and revival of indigenous practices in combination with sudden conversions to Christianity. Brainerd's Journal reports the revival, echoing many descriptions from Christian congregations: "most were much affected & many were in much distress; & some could neither go, nor stand; but lay flat on the ground as if stab'd at heart [sic]: Crying

incessantly for mercy.” At the same time, traveling Indian visionaries (itinerants, if you will) counseled separation from the ways of the whites and attributed recent epidemics and famines to divine displeasure. It is important to note that Native beliefs and Christianity were not mutually exclusive during these episodes: faith in rituals of offering, for example, coexisted with an interest in the Bible and led to the adoption of Christ or “the Lamb” as an accepted sacrificial object. The ambiguous results of the Indian Awakening are, in a sense, symptomatic for the diffuse workings of the entire Great Awakening.

Connecting the colonial revivals from the 1740s to the 1760s to the religious fervor in Jonathan Edwards’s church between 1733 and 1735 requires some historical imagination. Edwards, who was raised and trained in the Puritan tradition, faithfully ministered to one flock in Northampton, Massachusetts, emphasizing the importance of a personally felt conversion experience that had been central to the seventeenth-century church in New England. Edwards developed a new way of speaking about the sensory experience of grace, evoking both the terrors of hell and the rapturous joy of salvation in an appeal to the passions of his hearers. Seemingly in response to such stimuli, his parishioners began converting. Edwards described the 1730s events in a letter, which would be published as A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God (1738), providing the blueprint for later revivals in America and Britain. The spiritual turmoil in the town manifested itself in constant conversations about the requirements for salvation as well as in physical performances of ecstasy and despair: “The assembly in general were [...] in tears [...] some weeping with sorrow and distress, others with joy and love, others with pity and concern for the souls of their neighbors.”

In 1740, Edwards invited Whitefield to preach in his parish, which resulted in the conversion of Samuel Belcher, mentioned above. Though he was not personally involved in the

revivals in Pennsylvania and the South, Edwards became the most important philosophical defender of evangelicalism as criticism of the movement mounted. In his Treatise Concerning Religious Affections (1746), he tried to distinguish false conversions from real ones and define the proper place of emotion in religion. Edwards's attachment to New England tradition led him to require conversion narratives—so freely given during the Awakening—from his parishioners, which turned his congregation against him. From 1744 to 1748 not a single churchgoer felt the grace of God, forming an ignominious ending to Edwards's ministerial activities.

Jonathan Edwards's writings, however, became and remained famous in their own right. In "Images and Shadows of Divine Things" (compiled from his notebooks), he locates divine revelation in nature—an insight that may have inspired later Transcendentalist writers, especially Ralph Waldo Emerson. Edwards's Personal Narrative (c. 1740), an account of the highs and lows of his personal religious experience, continued to sell in the hundreds of thousands throughout the nineteenth century. In it, he integrates the two strains of thoughts that also dominate lay narratives from the revivals: joy and bliss at God's goodness and beauty alongside a sense of ingrained sinfulness and self-loathing. This strict binary division prompts his prose to swerve from descriptions of apparent corporal pleasure in the presence of God: "inexpressible purity, brightness, peacefulness and ravishment" to such a despairing sense of sin that it fractures grammar and meaning: "Infinite upon Infinite. Infinite upon Infinite!" The most memorable scenes in his narrative, however, are not of abjection but of delight: Edwards's "sweetness and longings and pantings of soul," "burning desire," and "eager thirsting" make spiritual experience sound sensual and seductive.

Edwards's personal prose also reveals the theological issue at the heart of the Great Awakening: the nature of 'saving knowledge.' Opponents of the revivals, who came to be known

as the ‘Old Lights’ or ‘Old Side,’ argued that true conversion followed an established order and procedure, which operated (in a particularly pre-Enlightenment twist) through reason, rather than beauty or feeling. Charles Chauncy, a Boston divine, formulated damning indictments of revivalist sentiment, which he disparagingly called enthusiasm: “The cause of this enthusiasm is a bad temperament of the blood and spirits; ‘tis properly a disease, a sort of madness [...] they are really beside themselves, acting as truly by the blind impetus of a wild fancy.” Chauncy’s physiological explanations echo the Awakening’s interest in bodily signs, though he of course condemns such corporeal manifestations of religiosity. Yet even in Chauncy’s remarks, as in Calvinist philosophy more generally, the revivals caused a shift away from the unknowable nature of God to an assessment of the state of man.

Practically speaking, the effects of the Awakening were limited: aside from schism in the American Presbyterian church, when Gilbert Tennent was ejected from the Synod of Philadelphia and joined the Synod of New York, some churchgoers further North left their congregations to form Separate communities, which would later become the New England Baptist Church. The small numbers and marginal status of such breakaway congregations casts real doubt on the concrete influence of the revivals. In light of the few lasting outcomes of the movement, it makes sense to return and add to the initial question: did the Great Awakening exist at all and why does it even matter?

First, the similarities between the Northampton awakening, Edwards’s and Whitefield’s preaching, and later revivals reveal a change in theological emphasis from doctrine to discourse. These events all stressed personal affect over argument and prioritized emotion as opposed to verbal expression in religious experience. This new hierarchy influenced later American philosophers such as William James, who claimed that theologians should not study the history

of ecclesiastical institutions, but rather the religious experience or “genius” of the individual, which consists of physiological responses to physical stimuli (such as bloodflow and narcotics). The individualizing impetus of the Great Awakening, then, which are even visible in Chauncy’s disdain, make religion a private matter to be felt and understood only in the discrete space a person and his or her God.

Yet, paradoxically, another defining element of the Great Awakening is its very publicness, including communal spectacles of conversion and preacherly performances. Edwards and Whitefield expostulated at length on the tortures of damnation and their hearers responded vehemently to both the content of the sermon and the vehicle of its delivery: the ministers’ body. Whitefield, we are told, “lookt almost angelical: [...] and a sweet sollome solemnity sat upon his brow.” His popular sermon on “Hell’s-Torments” (1738) reads as a counterpart to Edwards’s: “Infinite upon Infinite!”: “O wretched Man that I am, who shall deliver me from the Body of Death [...] But must I live for ever tormented in these Flames? Oh, Eternity!” Edwards, meanwhile, drew attention to the horrors of hell by delivering “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” (1741) in monotone, stressing both his imperviousness as a speaker and God’s ultimate indifference. On Whitefield, a listener notes: “hearing him preach, gave me a heart wound.” Whereas earlier converts spoke of being struck by God himself, the attention and agency is now focused on the physique of the preacher and outward observations such as sight, sound, and gesture come to contribute to conversion in essential ways.

Finally, the Great Awakening has served to inspire generations of American historians. It has been variously credited with developing the spirit of Jacksonian democracy (George Bancroft), images and shadows of Transcendentalism (Perry Miller), and the origins of the American Revolution (Alan Heimert). The fact that it has given rise to such widely varying

readings proves its versatile and enigmatic nature. Samuel Belcher could have predicted none of this. He would convert twice more, once after “Discourse” with a man in Lebanon, and “after hearing Mr Wheelock” preach, though he remained “afraid of Coming unworthily” to church. His narrative ends, like those of so many after him, on a search for that elusive moment of absolute truth, certainty, and awakening.

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