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# The Great Awakening

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1. For description of the Great Awakening as a flood, see Edwin Scott Gaustad, *The Great Awakening in New England* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), pp. 42–60. For detailed argument that the Great Awakening set the stage for the American Revolution, see Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966).

The Great Awakening has been described as a “flood” of religious enthusiasm. In the early 1740s, religious emotion washed up and down the colonial seaboard, passing from person to person and through community after community. In the extraordinary activity of what many colonists believed to be the spirit of God abroad on the land, the Great Awakening was the first large-scale intercolonial event in America—an event that, by the seeming force of God, united the interests and experiences of colonists as they had never before been united. It has been argued that this collective experience of religious enthusiasm set the stage for the patriotic fervor of the American Revolution.<sup>1</sup>

The name given to the event indicates the kind of experience it was for those who participated in it. During the Great Awakening, many colonists claimed—and exclaimed—that they woke up to God. As they watched their relatives and neighbors being struck with emotion and spiritual insight, and as they heard and read about Christians in other colonies having religious experiences, even those who objected to the enthusiasm could not help but feel that a movement of great magnitude was stirring America. The new and expanding printing industry enabled colonists to read newspaper and broadside accounts of the enthusiasm for religion developing in other colonies. Itinerant ministers spread the news of a Great Awakening sweeping the land, encouraging all who would listen to rouse from spiritual slumber and wake to the power of God. Thus for those who participated in the revivalism of the 1740s, the personal experience of awakening was a shared one. Through it, colonists became conscious of a consolidated vision of themselves. America herself, it seemed, was being roused to her destiny as a society of people who experienced God as the immediate author of their individual and collective lives.

The revivalist preachers of the Great Awakening emphasized feeling the presence of God and encouraged believers to cultivate subjective experiences of the most emotional kind. These could be satisfying, exhilarating, and glorifying for the individuals who enjoyed them. But

the religious enthusiasms of the Awakening also carried some troublesome fallout. The kind of religious experience that opened the self to God could lead persons to feel and act as if they *were* God. Individuals who confused their own will with the will of God might presume to carry out programs of divine justice through their own lives. A capacity for self-righteousness had characterized American Protestantism for more than a century. In certain ways, the Great Awakening exaggerated the lofty sense of destiny characteristic of colonial Christianity. In response to the intense spiritual exhilaration of the Awakening, some Protestant colonists confused the will of God with the expansion of their own communities and enterprises.

Thus to some extent the rush of piety in the early 1740s was channeled toward political imperialism. The Great Awakening contributed spiritual momentum to Protestant struggles to gain control of the eastern woodlands. Under the impetus of the Awakening, colonists intensified missionary activities among the Indians. During the 1740s a number of Indian communities in New England and Pennsylvania showed interest in Christianity and welcomed Protestant ministers into their communities.<sup>2</sup> Where it occurred, this increased receptivity undercut Indian resistance to the expansion of Protestantism in North America. Through the diplomacy of the Moravian convert Conrad Weiser, the powerful Iroquois confederacy became increasingly friendly to the Protestant colonies. The 1740s witnessed a shift in Iroquois power toward Protestant interests and consequently a fatal imbalance in the Iroquois policy of playing off French Catholics against English and Dutch Protestants in disputes over lands and furs west of the Allegheny Mountains.<sup>3</sup> Although Protestants took advantage of greater Indian friendliness to move their culture deeper into Indian territory, such moves were not always accompanied by a softening of Protestant hostility to Indians. When King George's war broke out in 1744, and Iroquois chiefs failed to dissuade the Abenaki from joining with the French against the British, colonial Protestants were more than eager to test their strength against Indian warriors and their French allies. Describing the massing of troops after the declaration of war in 1744, military historian Howard H. Peckham noted that the spiritual energy of the Awakening fanned the lust for war among Protestants in Massachusetts:

*As men and ships assembled in Boston, the enterprise gained something of the air of a crusade in the wake of the recent religious revival. It was supported by the clergy, for was it not directed against the popish French, those instigators of devilish Indian raids?*<sup>4</sup>

Throughout the colonial wars of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Catholic infiltration among Indians offered colonial Protestants the opportunity to proclaim aggressively the purity of Protestant culture. Catholic-Indian alliances worked to reconfirm the Puritan idea that the Church of Rome was the Whore of Babylon, a devouring mother and shameless harlot who seized political power by forging alliances with pagan peoples. But the Church of Rome was, after all, the ancient spiritual mother of Protestantism, and the Indians were the original people of America who held ancient inheritances to the land. Colonial Protestants tended to overlook these traditional claims and seemed to thrive on belief in the authority of their religion and culture.

2. John W. DeForest, *History of the Indians of Connecticut from the Earliest Known Period to 1850* (Hartford, Conn.: Wm. Jas. Hamersley, 1851), pp. 345, 353, 380-381, 384, 397, 400, 430, 451-455; Gaustad, *Great Awakening in New England*, pp. 105, 123-125.

3. Julian P. Boyd, "Indian Affairs in Pennsylvania, 1736-62," in *Indian Treaties Printed by Benjamin Franklin, 1736-1762* (Philadelphia: Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1938), pp. xxi-xlv; Joseph S. Walton, *Conrad Weiser and the Indian Policy of Colonial Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs, 1900); Anthony F.C. Wallace, *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca* (New York: Vintage Press, 1972), pp. 111-114.

4. Howard H. Peckham, *The Colonial Wars, 1689-1762* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1964), pp. 107, 100.

This spiritual pride enabled American Protestants to rationalize their own political expansion. The communal exhilaration of the Great Awakening helped support and sanctify that expansion.

But something more spiritually profound than self-righteousness and imperialism was also at work among awakened colonists. The visions reported in the Great Awakening testified to the beauty and presence of God in nature and to foundational rhythms and harmonies structuring the created world. Colonial Protestants who enjoyed these experiences found their sense of religion broadened and even transformed; the highly rational and complex superstructure of colonial Protestantism dissolved in vivid sensations of the immediacy of divine life. In another class of religious experience equally characteristic of Great Awakening religion, colonists were warned of the damnation in store for those who bent the power of religion to personal egotism and political greed. Persons subjected to these perceptions of divine retribution described them as visions of hell. As a dominant theme in the Great Awakening, hell served to remind believers of the dangers entailed in worshipping security or self rather than God. In the attention lavished on hell, self-righteousness was warned against and shown to be inimical to the spirit of true religion.

In the Great Awakening of the 1740s, and indeed in the subsequent awakenings that periodize the history of American Christianity, Americans have seen divine beauty and power in nature. And their religious experiences have warned them of the fallacy and danger of locating divine power in their own designs and ambitions. Americans may well be judged for failure to live according to these visions.<sup>5</sup> But if the tragedy of religion in America is revealed in the selfishness of religious believers, what makes this history a tragedy and not simply a sordid tale of human meaninglessness is the fact that many Americans have experienced visions of reality that comprehended and criticized their own designs and provided them with moral and spiritual alternatives. If the history of religion in America is a tragic history, the dynamics that make it so involve the failure of American society to appreciate fully the wealth of visions of beauty and moral compensation experienced by so many individuals.

It is the purpose of this essay to examine the religious visions that Americans experienced in the era of the Great Awakening and to show how these visions reveal an ironic psychological dilemma as well as the capacity for beauty and moral goodness in what one might call the American heart. It is a further and related contention that the religious visions Americans woke up to in the eighteenth century are not exclusively or even essentially Christian, but that Americans who participated in the Great Awakening called on Christian doctrine and imagery to understand, explain, and mask what had happened to them.

The revivalists of the 1740s preached a doctrine of rebirth that involved two distinct stages of awakening. First came realization of the evil lurking inside the self, eating away at the soul and poisoning all of one's thoughts and actions. Colonists were asked to picture the hell prepared for them by their own deeds and laying in wait in the depths of their own hearts. One of the preachers most skilled at leading people to see the hell in their hearts and futures was Jonathan Edwards. In "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" (1741), Edwards encouraged

5. Considerable scholarly attention has been paid of late to the psychological dynamics of American failure. See, for example, Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978). For analysis of how Protestant perceptions about Native Americans lie at the heart of this failure and its pathology, see Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1973); Robert F. Berkoff, Jr., *The White Man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978); and Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire-Building* (New York: New American Library, 1980). Michael Paul Rogin's *Fathers & Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian* (New York: Vintage Press, 1975) offers analysis of a particular leader with wide-reaching implications about American leadership and its perennial failures.

his congregation to picture "that world of misery, that lake of burning brimstone . . . extended abroad under you." With "hell's wide gaping mouth open" beneath them, Edwards urged those now "hanging over the pit" of their self-destruction to "hearken to the loud calls of God's word" and "awake and fly from the wrath to come."<sup>6</sup>

6. Jonathan Edwards, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," in *Jonathan Edwards: Basic Writings*, ed. Ola Winslow (New York: New American Library, 1966), pp. 157, 166-167.

**T**he psychological power of Edwards's sermon depended on the correspondence it drew between the future punishments of hell and the world of misery in the hearts of his listeners. Internal misery, Edwards implied, was the cause of future punishment. The source of internal misery was man's self-righteousness, his delusion that by his own effort he could control his destiny and achieve security, progress, and happiness. "Almost every natural man that hears of hell," Edwards preached, "flatters himself that he shall escape it; he depends upon himself for his own security; he flatters himself in what he has done, in what he is now doing, or what he intends to do." But in truth, Edwards continued, these men ultimately "have no refuge, nothing to take hold of; all that preserves them every moment is the mere arbitrary will, and unconvenanted, unobliged forbearance of an incensed God."<sup>7</sup>

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 155, 157.

In Edwards's religion, hell was a realm of ultimate and eternal self-destruction. Hell existed to punish human beings for their rebellious acts against the sovereignty of God. For the lucky Christian, hell was escaped and the self was saved from its cravings for independent authority and from the damnation it consequently deserved. Waking up to the wrath of God was succeeded by a second, higher, happier state of awakening, an awakening in which the soul became transparent. Sinners tormented by thoughts of the fires of hell might suddenly and wonderfully find themselves bathed in the cooler light of God's love. This divine light, Edwards believed, was the omnipresence of God, a light that saved the sinner from delusions of separation from God. In a sermon published by request of his congregation, Edwards evoked the idea of a "divine light shining into the soul" which "gives a view of those things that are immensely the most exquisitely beautiful." These beautiful things were not imaginary fancies but natural things, as they appeared from God's point of view. The sun, for example, was seen not merely as a natural object but as a natural vehicle for the light of God. For persons thus enraptured, the very nature of the soul was enlightened. Under the transformational influence of this divine light, the soul woke up to the power of God and mirrored its beauty. This light "changes the soul into an image of the same glory that is beheld."<sup>8</sup>

8. Jonathan Edwards, "A Divine and Supernatural Light" (1734), in *Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Winslow, pp. 131-134.

In Edwards's religion, this second stage of awakening, in which the soul mirrored God, was not to be confused with the sinner's delusion that he had a godlike control over his own destiny. That sense of command, Edwards believed, was dispelled in the first stage of awakening, in which the self was weaned from its delusions of grandeur. The second stage of awakening presumed humility. But despite the stipulation that the soul must loose itself in order to become like God, the religion of the Great Awakening offered colonists a complex and ironic psychological dilemma. How was one to know that an experience of God was not merely the experience of one's own self-glorification? Edwards suggested some answers to this question, although even he could not put to rest the clamor for self-authenticating experiences of God raised in the Great Awakening. Edwards argued that a life of

charity and understanding toward others was a distinguishing sign of true virtue. Behaving with beauty and goodness was the sign of an authentic experience of God.<sup>9</sup>

From the point of view of comparative religions, the twofold psychological process encouraged during the Great Awakening bears formal similarities to spiritual odysseys recommended in a variety of the world's religions. A journey of descent into the soul in which the terrors of evil and death are passed through is an ordeal characteristic of many mystical practices, as is the further transformational experience of spiritual rebirth. The religious traumas and joys of the Great Awakening are thus American examples of a universal struggle for spiritual understanding. And yet as all mystical rites carry the peculiar flavor of a distinct religious tradition, so in the case of the Great Awakening, salvation from hellfire and brimstone bears the peculiar odor of a distinctly American religion. To appreciate the distinctiveness of American Christianity it is important to look more closely at the historical and cultural tensions that came to expression in the American colonies during the 1740s.

**D**uring and after the Awakening, Christians throughout the colonies took sides for or against the revivals, addressing themselves vociferously and prolifically to one another. The Awakening elicited a perceptible shift in styles of being religious and announced a turning point in the history of American Christianity. As individuals voiced their beliefs about the nature and power of the Awakening, they disputed with one another over how to interpret the emotional feelings and dramatic behavior it had spawned. Both detractors and supporters characterized the movement as an outpouring of religious enthusiasm in which pieties of anguish and exuberance exceeded conventional boundaries. The Awakening fostered a new freedom to act out religious feelings and a new freedom to speak from the heart about religious terrors and joys. Colonists could be found praying aloud, singing and even dancing to Christ. And this enthusiasm for experiencing and dramatizing religious feelings not only intensified rituals in churches and homes but also spilled out of doors on town commons and into the streets. Christians found religion outdoors, and some of them, notably Jonathan Edwards, made a daily habit of ritual meditation in the woods.

There are several sources from which the enthusiasms of the Awakening flowed. The writings and activities of pietistical enthusiasts in Germany and England exercised an often acknowledged influence on colonial revivalism. The German Moravians, The English perfectionist John Wesley, and the great English orator George Whitefield have received credit for bringing pietistical enthusiasm to America. Religious developments and pressures internal to colonial Christianity also contributed to the gush of spirituality. The colonial desire for unity wanted to come from God, and it looked for religious expression.

After acknowledging these influences, there is ample room to argue that the Awakening and the religious changes it brought also owe something to the history of colonial encounters with Native Americans. A terrible fascination with images from the world of Indian fires and war dances was in part responsible for the preoccupation with hell characteristic of Great Awakening religion. And more positively, some of the religious practices embraced by Christians in the Great Awakening can

9. This interpretation of Edwards's analysis of authentic experiences of God is culled from three of his writings: *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England* (1742), reprinted in *The Great Awakening: The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Clarence C. Goen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 4; *A Treatise on the Religious Affections* (1746), reprinted in *Works*, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 2; and *The Nature of True Virtue* (1775), reprinted, ed. William Frankena (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960).

be seen as borrowings from indigenous American culture. The ritual singing and dance, the oratorical brilliance, and the experience of divine power in nature characteristic of American Indian culture seem to have deeply affected colonial Christians and contributed to their new religion.

**I**t is important to acknowledge that the influence of indigenous Americans on colonial Protestants did not operate at a conscious level in the minds of those Christians. American Protestants tended to see American Protestantism as the only true religion and, as such, absolutely distinct from the "paganism" and "witchcraft" believed to characterize the beliefs and behavior of indigenous Americans. Indeed, the colonial interpretation of Indian rituals as demonic, antireligious practices served to rationalize the Christian domination of the Indians and their lands. But the Indian mode of being in the world exercised influence on the souls of white Americans, even as the Indians were perceived as symbols of evil. White faces who sought to replace the Indians of America could find red faces returned to haunt them. In the era of the Great Awakening, the revenge of the Indian was deeply internalized in Protestant hearts. When seen in the context of the Indian wars recurrent in colonial history, the hellfire and brimstone imagery characteristic of the Awakening reveals Protestant fears about Indian attacks, Indian captivity, and Indian torture. In Great Awakening religion, hell was the savage underworld of a righteously angry God.

For example, in "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," Jonathan Edwards compared the sinner's proximity to the devils of hell with the vulnerability of the sinner to bloodthirsty but stealthy Indians. "The devils watch them," Edwards said about the plight of sinners; the devils "are ever by them at their right hand; they stand waiting for them, like greedy hungry lions that see their prey, and expect to have it, but are for the present kept back." To stimulate fear of hell, Edwards capitalized on images familiar to his listeners from stories about Indian warfare, as in his warning that "the arrows of death fly unseen at noonday; the sharpest sight cannot discern them." Among the most powerful images in this memorable sermon is Edwards's use of the bow and arrow to describe the anger and justice of God.

*The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart, and strains the bow, and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, and that of an angry God, that keeps the arrow one moment from being made drunk with your blood.*<sup>10</sup>

10. "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," Jonathan Edwards, ed. Winslow, pp. 153, 154, 157-158. Cf. Slotkin, *Regeneration*, pp. 103-106.

In this conceit, Edwards depicted God as if he were a colossal Indian, with a vengeful heart and deadly aim.

To further illustrate how Indians influenced the religion of the Great Awakening, we turn to the description of a worship service recorded by a Christian minister in Massachusetts. After the leader of the group had sung with his congregation, he drew attention to his own heart. According to the minister who observed the incident, the leader then "passed from one End . . . to the other, with his Eyes fast shut, seeming to be in the utmost Agony, [and] used all the frightful motions and distorted gestures imaginable." This could be a description of James Davenport, the excessively emotional preacher who turned the once tight-lipped and tightly argued sermons of colonial Protestantism into wild theatrics and who was, by the end of the Awakening, declared *non compos mentis*.

The passage might even apply to George Whitefield, Gilbert Tennent, or other charismatic figures of the movement whose sanities were not formally brought to trial. But the frightful motions and distorted gestures reported here were not part of an awakened yearning for Christ. The event took place in 1735 in a wigwam. John Sergeant, missionary to the Housatonic Indians in Stockbridge, attended and recorded the ritual.<sup>11</sup>

"Frightful motions" and "distorted gestures" are typical descriptions of Indian ritual as interpreted by explorers, traders, trappers, missionaries, and colonists. And frightful motions and distorted gestures were precisely what Davenport, Whitefield, Tennent, and other revivalist preachers were criticized for. In his much-published sermon of 1742, "Enthusiasm Described and Caution'd Against," Charles Chauncy attributed the "great reputation" of revivalists to "the extraordinary fervour of their minds, accompanied with uncommon bodily motions, and an excessive confidence and assurance."<sup>12</sup>

Protestant observers of Indian rituals commonly attributed those events to Satan. From the same world view, opponents of the Awakening suggested that the recent plague of religious disorders proceeded from the Devil himself. Along these lines, a provocative analysis of the Awakening was written under the name of Theophilus Misodaemon and published in Benjamin Franklin's *General Magazine* in 1741. To explain the religious madness, Mr. Misodaemon offered the hypothesis that a "wonderful WANDERING SPIRIT" has been "raised of late . . . by some Religious Conjuror; but whether in the Conclave at Rome or where else, is not so certain."

*This Spirit . . . has been seen, felt and heard by Thousands in America. 'Tis raging and proud; censorious and ill-natur'd; deals much by Feelings and Impulses, in violent bodily Convulsions; and pretends to uncommon Discernments. When it possesses the Mob, which it delights to torture, they swell and shake like . . . those possess'd with the Devil . . . 'Tis remarkable for one Quality, that all that it bewitches generally bid farewell to Reason, and are carried by it to the Land of Clouds and Darkness. . . .*<sup>13</sup>

This criticism of the Awakening argues that its wonderful wandering spirit is "Belial, taking a tour in disguise," and links the revivalist ministers with black magic and the "Holy Necromancers" of Catholicism. Readers are reminded that this dark phantom "has often haunted our Borders." This same Devil, whose rituals infest the American wilderness, supervises all forms of paganism:

*It must be the Spirit that inspired the Bacchanals in Days of Yore, because some of its chief Votaries, while under its Impulses, have wallowed in Lewdness. They that are acquainted with the Affairs of the East, alledge that it is the same Spirit that was familiar with Mohomet; because it has the same fierce and savage Temper. . . .*

The venom unleashed against the wonderful wandering spirit of the Awakening was informed by a tradition of fear in which the rituals of Indian religions were linked with witchcraft, popery, satanism, sexuality, and moral anarchy. From the point of view of its detractors, the spirit conjured up by the rituals of the Awakening was the savage spirit of pagan America. The imagery that entwined witchcraft, Catholicism, and lewd bacchanals haunting colonial borders is the same imagery used

11. John Sergeant, quoted in *Historical Memoirs Relating to the Housatunnuk Indians*, Samuel Hopkins (Boston, 1753), p. 24.

12. Charles Chauncy, "Enthusiasm Described and Caution'd Against," in *The Great Awakening, Documents Illustrating the Crisis and Its Consequences*, Alan Heimert and Perry Miller, eds. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), p. 234.

13. This and all other quotes by Theophilus Misodaemon are from "The Wandering Spirit," reprinted in *Great Awakening*, ed. Heimert and Miller, pp. 147-151.



for seventy years in sermons and captivity narratives to describe Indians. In 1692 in Salem Village, Protestant notions about Indian devil worship abetted the discovery of witchcraft within the Salem community. And the sporadic military associations among French and Indians after 1675 nurtured the Protestant conviction that the paganism of the American savages bore a congenital relation to the Catholicism of the French. Thus for a century, members of the New Israel of American Puritanism defined themselves against the unholy Indian Canaan which surrounded, infiltrated, and threatened to engulf them.<sup>14</sup>

New England Puritans read the Old Testament as if it were the script of their own history. They were the new Jews, the chosen people of Israel reborn in America; the Indians were the pagan people of the new Canaan whose idolatrous nature religion threatened and tempted the people of God. To take just one example of this habit of interpretation, the Puritan writer Cotton Mather used an episode in the Book of Judges to explain the murder of ten Indians by three Protestant captives in 1697: Hannah Dustan, her nurse, and a young English boy, "to imitate the Action of Jael upon Sisera, . . . struck such Home Blows, upon the Heads of their Sleeping Oppressors, that e'er they could . . . Struggle into any Effectual Resistance . . . *there they fell down Dead.* (Judges v. 27)"<sup>15</sup> Thus in the world view of American Puritanism, relations between colonists and Indians were perceived in terms of Old Testament stories about Israel among the Canaanites. In 1740, when physical displays of religious emotion became contagious, and colonists with conservative religious habits were frightened by the new religion sweeping the country, the world view of American Puritanism supplied an explanation of the problem. The sorcery and the apparently frenzied nature worship indigenous to America was infecting and seducing colonists, just as the ancient religion of Baal periodically lured people of Israel away from their faith in Yahweh.

Critics of the Awakening agreed that a seductive style of preaching was part of its sorcery. Charleston's commissary Alexander Garden argued that while Whitefield's doctrines were crude and insubstantial, they produced a favorable effect on hearers because "*they were preached midst the Sound of that Gentleman's Voice in your Ears—that enchanting Sound!*" Whitefield "*acted his part in the Pulpit*" as if he were "*on the Stage.*" It was "*not the Matter but the Manner, not the Doctrines he delivered, but the Agreeableness of the Delivery that had all the Effect.*"<sup>16</sup> Garden protested not only Whitefield's style of rhetoric but also his emphasis on rhetoric. In Garden's perception, Whitefield's words did more than embellish the Word of God; Whitefield undermined the plain Word of God with the power of his own oratory.

Whitefield was not the only accomplished and fiery rhetorician of the Awakening. In departure from the traditional style of colonial preaching, many Awakening revivalists used words to deliver the sensation of piety as well as the truth of doctrine. Conversely, Gilbert Tennent could identify unconverted ministers by their "cowardly Discourses." In Tennent's theology of oratory, verbal power was an effect of religious experience. Unconverted preachers were not convincing. They spoke about God without subjective intimacy. In Tennent's words, these

14. See Charles H. Lincoln, ed., *Narratives of the Indian Wars, 1675-1699* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1913); and Slotkin, *Regeneration*, pp. 94-145.

15. Cotton Mather, *Decennium Luctuosum: An History of Remarkable Occurrences in the Long War, which New-England Hath Had with the Indian Salvages, from the Year 1688, to the Year 1698, Faithfully Composed and Improved* (Boston, 1699), reprinted in *Narratives*, ed. Lincoln, p. 266. Biblical reference taken from Judg. 5:27.

16. Alexander Garden, "Regeneration, and the Testimony of the Spirit" (1740), in *Great Awakening*, ed. Heimert and Miller, p. 47.

"Pharisee-Teachers . . . know not how to speak a Word to the Weary in Season. Their Prayers are also cold; little child-like Love to God . . . runs thro' their Veins."<sup>17</sup>

This childlike, "primitive" expressionism spread even to the urbane and intellectually elite. One refined but spirited revivalist was the Boston minister Benjamin Colman. According to Ebenezer Turell, Colman's

*"Speech and Doctrine were dropt as the Dew, and distilled as the small Rain upon a tender Herb," yet when occasions for it occurred he could notably imitate a Boangeres, and play the Artillery of Heaven.*<sup>18</sup>

Colman was not only a respected friend of the Awakening, he was also an active supporter of missionary work among the Indians. In a letter of 1742 he reported with satisfaction that several tribes of Connecticut Indians, who before the Awakening "obstinately continu'd in Infidelity," now "apply for Instruction to the Pastors about them and receive it greedily, and with great Thankfulness, and Numbers of them seem savingly wrought upon."<sup>19</sup> Perhaps the spirit of God sparked this sudden greed for Christian instruction among the Connecticut Indians. Certainly the awakened rhetoric of their ministers prompted that spirit.

Other missionaries of the period found that converting Indians depended on conveying in words a personal feeling for Christ. Missionary David Brainerd attributed the sudden success of Christianity in 1745 among Delaware Indians in Crossweeksung, New Jersey, to his interpreter's "experiential acquaintance with divine things." Brainerd was indebted to his Indian interpreter for translating his sermons and prayers with "admirable zeal and fervency."<sup>20</sup> Like other eighteenth-century missionaries to the Indians, Brainerd made some effort to learn Indian languages because he discovered that successful preaching to Native Americans required speaking directly and warmly from the heart. It was not enough to convey the principles of Christianity to the Indians these missionaries hoped to convert; it was essential to preach religiously as well as to preach about religion.

Native Americans responded to the power of words because they cultivated this power themselves. Missionaries, traders, and colonial leaders admired the beauty and clarity with which Indians spoke, even in the English language. In treaty negotiations, Indian spokesmen communicated their grievances graphically and often stated the concepts on which their political strategies were based with far more precision and art than their colonial counterparts.<sup>21</sup> Indians themselves regarded speechmaking and storytelling as a religious art. The ability to embody ideas and experiences in words was and continues to be an art prized among Native Americans for its power to direct and shape the human mind.<sup>22</sup> Participants in the Great Awakening learned to prize the art of depicting ideas and sensations in words. David Brainerd named this religious art the "native language of spiritual sensation."<sup>23</sup> This sensitivity to the power of words enabled preachers to recreate the Word of God as a live experience in the minds of their listeners.

Heartfelt and artful rhetoric was essential to the dramatic rituals that emerged with the Awakening. These dramatic rituals and the language that accompanied them are related to a third aspect of religious practice characteristic of Great Awakening religion. A spiritual intimacy with

17. Gilbert Tennent, "The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry" (1741), in *Great Awakening*, ed. Heimert and Miller, p. 79.

18. Ebenezer Turell, *The Life and Character of the Reverend Benjamin Colman, D.D.* (1749), quoted in *Great Awakening in New England*, Gaustad, p. 50.

19. Benjamin Colman, quoted in *Great Awakening in New England*, Gaustad, p. 124.

20. David Brainerd, *David Brainerd, His Life and Diary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1949), pp. 246–247. For other examples of contemporaneous missionaries who found it important to cultivate the art of preaching in Indian languages, see Hopkins, *Historical Memoirs*, p. 59; and Eleazar Wheelock, *A Plain and Faithful Narrative of the Indian Charit-School at Lebanon, Connecticut* (Boston, 1763).

21. See *Indian Treaties Printed by Benjamin Franklin* for recurrent examples of this point.

22. For discussion of American Indian philosophy of language as effective power, see N. Scott Momaday, "The Man Made of Words," in *Literature of the American Indians: Views and Interpretations*, Abraham Chapman, ed. (New York: New American Library, 1975), pp. 96–110.

23. Brainerd, *Life and Diary*, p. 151. Cf. Perry Miller, "The Rhetoric of Sensation," in *Errand into the Wilderness* (1956; reprint ed., New York: Harper & Row, 1964), pp. 167–193.

nature motivated and interpreted new experiments in religious experience. Brainerd's *Life and Diary* provides a most striking example of this environmental spirituality. Brainerd cultivated a psychology of the woods, removing himself from worldly communities and seeking the isolation from colonial society that he hoped would bring him closer to God.

**A**lthough he did not make the correlation explicit, Brainerd assumed the life-style of an Indian in order to live with God, submitting to the ardors and welcoming the inspirations of the forest. It was in the natural environment of the forest that Brainerd found the solitude that accompanied his first definitive experience of God.

*As I was walking in a dark thick grove, unspeakable glory seemed to open to the view and apprehension of my soul. I do not mean any external brightness, for I saw no such thing. Nor do I intend any imagination of a body of light somewhere in the third heavens, or anything of that nature; but it was a new inward apprehension or view that I had of God, such as I never had before, nor anything which had the least resemblance of it. . . . I had no particular apprehension of any one Person in the Trinity, either the Father, the Son, or the Holy Ghost; but it appeared to be divine glory. . . . My soul was so captivated . . . that I was even swallowed up in Him.<sup>24</sup>*

24. Brainerd, *Life and Diary*, p. 69.

Though Brainerd's experience was not an Indian's experience, it did depart from earlier conventions of Puritan spirituality. Rather than feeling the transcendent sovereignty of God, Brainerd felt the immanence of God in nature. His openness to this kind of experience may have come from his religious acquaintance with Delaware Indians. In Brainerd's perception of divine light, it was the natural environment of the forest, not the church or the study, that offered the sacred space of religious inspiration. As he remarked in the diary entry quoted above, Brainerd's understanding of God did not involve theological imagery or doctrine particular to Christianity. He simply and fully experienced the immediate sanctity of the natural world. It is perhaps most accurate to speak of Brainerd, who cultivated responses like these, as a cultural hybrid, a frontier Christian with a native taste for spiritual sensation.

The Great Awakening may be interpreted as a high wave in a great tide of counteracculturation. As they conquered the Indians and their lands, Christians were more subtly conquered by the presence of indigenous Americans. The corruption and genocide of the Indians are writ large across the face of American history. Working underneath the tide of the bitter history of removal are countercurrents of attraction and imitation. The white will to establish family in America, to replace the Indians, and to "utilize" the land functioned as a forceful, conscious agenda countered, often at a less conscious level, by a subtle gravitation to Indian ways of life.

The American Indians encountered by colonists had a wealth of knowledge about the animals, plants, and seasonal characteristics of particular regions, and they had highly developed techniques for deriving sustenance from these environments. Colonists absorbed a great deal of this practical knowledge. The new settlers built their economy on the corn and tobacco plants originally domesticated by the

Indians. The settlers adopted hundreds of herbal remedies from the Indians, and these medicines became the basis of an American pharmacology.<sup>25</sup> But the Indians regarded their agricultural and medical knowledge not as mere technology but as religious knowledge, believing that the domestication of plants and the discovery of their medicinal properties were basic elements of religion. To the settlers who absorbed the practical knowledge of the Indians, the original religious context of this knowledge was not as obvious, nor apparently as useful, as the technology itself. In overlooking the religious basis of this practical wisdom, the settlers apparently missed the forest for the trees. But as our discussion of the Great Awakening has suggested, almost in spite of themselves, colonists absorbed some powerful ideas about the spiritual nature of the forest.

25. See Harold E. Driver, *Indians of North America*, 2nd ed. rev. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1969), pp. 66–83, 105–108; Virgil J. Vogel, *American Indian Medicine* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972).

As we have seen, enthusiasm for religion swept the colonies in the 1740s in the midst of intermittent and long-strung-out warfare between Protestants and Indians. The Protestants who sought to establish their culture in the “New” World assumed they had God’s permission to replace the people who claimed the American land as an ancient inheritance. Both participants and critics of the Great Awakening were encouraged to look beyond colonial boundaries for a spirit of religious unity that drew them together as Americans. In the years following the Great Awakening, Protestants drew on this spirit of unity to promote their own political causes and religious parochialisms and, most ironically of all, to destroy the very people who knew how and what it was to be American. It rarely occurred to these young colonists that the spirit that unified them as Americans might be an ancient spirit of place. And only the detractors of the Awakening, like Theophilus Misodaemon, saw that the Wonderful Wandering Spirit of the Awakening was intimately associated with the presence and attitudes of the indigenous peoples of America.

In an important but hidden sense, a new religion was formed in the Great Awakening. Ironically, the colonists who most enthusiastically embraced the drama, oratory, and environmentalism of the Great Awakening were the least inclined to see and acknowledge that they were involved in a new religion. Colonists caught up in the movement defended, explained, and masked what was happening to them by asserting their credentials as Christians. Only Theophilus Misodaemon, Charles Chauncy, and other outraged critics of the Awakening saw that an influence from outside the boundaries of Protestant piety was touching the hearts of American colonists.

The irony of the Great Awakening reached deep into the psychic wellsprings of the colonists who intended to be good Christians. Jonathan Edwards’s stipulation, that to be truly awakened the Protestant must first lose his old sense of self, carried a dimension of truth that even Edwards was unaware of. Visions of God became hopelessly confused with visions of self, in part because colonial experiences of self were in a state of flux. And the nature of God was changing for awakened Americans, as was their sense of how to communicate with God. The deity worshiped by awakened colonists was deeply associated with the beauty and violence of the Indians and their religious rituals. But in their psychic turmoil, colonial Protestants held on to their old sense of religion and ethnicity; tragically, they turned their new reli-

gious energy to serve a Protestant imperialism, expanding their own communities and enterprises against the Indians with the energy of Indians.

The idea of an incensed God and the preoccupation with hell in the Great Awakening were fed by images of the dances and fires of avenging Indians. In the theories of hell advanced in the Great Awakening, internal misery and future damnation were fair punishment for the greed of self-righteous, self-appointed Christians. Thus in an indirect, internalized sense, awakened colonists sensed their own wrongs in some relation to the rightful claims of the Indians. But this sense of indebtedness remained in the underworlds of hell and of unconscious guilt. Because the Indians haunted and avenged them, American Protestants could not awake to a conscious sense of dependence on and gratitude toward the Indians for their gifts of agriculture, medicine, and spiritual liberation. Jonathan Edwards argued that sinners tried to escape hell and rise above internal misery by self-flattery and good intentions. Using an analogous argument, one could say that American Protestants sought to cover their internal miseries of guilt and fear toward the Indians with the delusion of ethnic superiority and the flattery of religious self-righteousness. But if the failures of American society have fed off this dilemma, there is a reservoir of religious experience working underneath and through this tragedy. Many Americans have woken up beyond themselves, at least momentarily, to the spiritual voices of their environment. Perhaps one could say that the love of a Great Spirit dwells at the very bottom of the American heart.



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## *In Time*

From a chair on the dark side  
Of his study a drowned man  
Watches his body surface.  
It's wedged in the rocks now  
And he can tell by the fit  
He's back in his own chair.  
And the hand that taps the arm  
Is cold; is his own hand.  
He wants to breathe on the hand,  
He would keep it alive. Only  
There in his chest the sound  
Of water rushes between rocks.  
This is the sound the blood makes  
As it plunges into the heart  
Of a man who believes he has drowned.  
Quiet. Listen. Inside. O God. There.

—Joe-Anne McLaughlin